

ON TARA READE'S ALLEGATIONS || ALABAMA COMMUNISTS

KATHA POLLITT

ROBERT GREENE II

THE
Nation.

JUNE 15/22, 2020

SPECIAL ISSUE

BIG

In times
of crisis, ideas
that were once
considered
radical can
enter the
mainstream.

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ZOË CARPENTER

JANE McALEVEY

ELIE MYSTAL

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Letters

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Don't Blame the Boasians

Jennifer Wilson's review of Charles King's *Gods of the Upper Air* ["The Circle," May 18/25] missed important aspects of the work of anthropologist Franz Boas and his students. Their goal was less to "explain human diversity" than to understand the unfamiliar on its own terms, with cultural learning rather than biology as the main causal factor.

Of the group, only Zora Neale Hurston receives praise, for her contribution to "literary anthropology," but blaming other Boasians for making racism "more palatable" in the 1960s and '70s is nonsense. Perhaps Oscar Lewis's concept of a "culture of poverty" was used in that way by politicians, but the main thrust of Boas and his students was the creation of scholarly work that embraced relativism over ethnocentrism and rejected race as an explanation for cultural development. To blame them for "liberal racism," whatever that may be, is simply wrong.

PHILIP K. BOCK
*Emeritus Professor of Anthropology,
University of New Mexico
ALBUQUERQUE*

Wilson's review of *Gods of the Upper Air* provides some interesting insights into Boas and his most eminent anthropology students at Columbia in the 1920s but is wearily of our time. Discounting King's praise for the group's salutary effect on prevalent American prejudices, Wilson observes in the manner of almost any respectable academic scholarship of recent decades, "It becomes clear that their ideas about culture and cultural differences were not as distinct as they imagined from the notions of racial difference they sought to overturn."

I don't doubt it. It's a point that needs making. But it shouldn't be the main point. Like all of us, they were to a large extent prisoners of their

era. To me, what is interesting is the degree to which they weren't.

Ruth Benedict's most widely read book, *Patterns of Culture*, which Wilson doesn't mention, is a truly liberating and mind-expanding work. Her scholarship has been criticized for its deficiencies but, to my knowledge, has not been debunked. Benedict's book is an invaluable reminder that our propensity to normalize our presuppositions proceeds from our culture and not from human nature per se.

ANTHONY DANGERFIELD
MEDFORD, MASS.

Tilting at Windmills

Re "Organizing on the Coasts Won't Save the Planet" [by Jane Fleming Kleeb, May 4/11]: Windmills are so beautiful? Those coastal aesthetes have to be kidding. One or two in isolation and seen from a slight distance might be, but scores or hundreds, all too near the road and extending sometimes for miles, are as ugly as any other industrial excrescence.

I would bet even money most of those people grew up in cookie-cutter suburbs and have routinely referred to "flyover country" ever since they first heard the phrase. They have never been there, and they have no knowledge of the beauty of a landscape under a vast sky that stretches from one uncluttered horizon to the other. They do not care whether that is spoiled, since it's not in their backyard.

Windmills may be necessary. The Midwest may be a good place for them. But don't try to justify foisting them on other people by pretending you're offering some sort of aesthetic gift. Arrogant ignorance will not foster the alliances Kleeb rightly says are needed.

KATHARINE W. RYLAARSDAM
BALTIMORE

(continued on page 34)

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New Beginnings

This should be a start-from-scratch moment. The pandemic is not just a health crisis. It has made clear what *Nation* readers already know: A tiny elite in the US siphons off the wealth while most people struggle from paycheck to paycheck. Since mid-March, America's billionaires have increased their

combined net worth by \$434 billion—even as nearly 40 million workers have lost their jobs and some 100,000 people here have died from Covid-19. The dead are disproportionately black, Latinx, and Native. This isn't surprising; this is how tragedies go in America. As *Nation* contributing writer Zoë Carpenter argues in this issue, "While Covid-19 is novel, its impact at the community level was predictable."

With this crisis, working people can see the fragility and cruelty inherent in our systems of health care, housing, and employment in the US. But it is up to the left to translate this collective outrage into the building blocks of a more just society.

Nation contributing editor Mike Davis starts our "Time to Think Big" special issue with news of worker-led uprisings: "Refusing to die for profits or endanger family members, rank-and-file workers have rebelled on a scale not seen since the early 1970s." From bus drivers in Detroit and poultry workers in Georgia to fast food workers in Chicago and nurses across the country, we're seeing "not just the stirrings of revolt," he writes, "but an ever-broadening insurgency led from the grass roots."

The populist anger is there, ripe for political transformation, notes *Nation* strikes correspondent Jane McAlevey. She argues that the left's big ideas will require massive government spending—and that means taxing the rich. In order to deliver a Green New Deal, Medicare for All, and tuition-free college education, progressives need to build a mass movement targeted at eliminating austerity politics.

Meanwhile, *The Nation's* justice correspondent (and humorist), Elie Mystal, questions why Americans have "remained tied to an Industrial Revolution idea of workers showing up to the giant widget place so an overseer can motivate them to produce profits." The bonus of radically changing this paradigm: no more commuting.

Every evening at 7 in New York City, the US epicenter of Covid-19, residents bang pots and applaud to thank essential workers, including nurses, child care providers, and home health aides. But as *Nation* contributing writer Bryce Covert explains, "Just because we're finally calling care workers heroes doesn't mean we're willing to pay them more." So what will it take? Covert reports on organizing efforts to demand that society finally value their labor.

Essential workers would surely benefit from strong unions, yet organized labor remains "paralyzed," longtime labor activist Bill Fletcher Jr. writes. He criticizes large trade unions for protecting their own shrinking fiefs, just when an inclusive workers' movement is needed most.

Right now, labor isn't getting much support from the Democratic Party. According to national affairs correspondent John Nichols, "Democrats once dreamed the biggest dreams: of thwarting the politics of hatred and...achieving economic and social and racial justice and peace and prosperity." Today, however, they're a party of tax credits, means testing, and marginal corrections to capitalism. He argues that if the party is to transform America, it must embrace the vision of a bolder, more expansive New Deal championed by Franklin Roosevelt's popular vice president Henry Wallace.

Finally, Julian Brave NoiseCat interprets another, far older American legacy. He writes that "us Natives," having survived pandemics and so much else, are a "postapocalyptic people" who "have something to lend to a broader humanity that now faces its own existential crises in the form of disease and climate change." Indian Country is NoiseCat's model for emerging from this cataclysm with the full knowledge of who you are, where you're from, and what you stand for.

CHRISTOPHER SHAY FOR *THE NATION*



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Katha Pollitt



On Tara Reade's Allegations

We should take women's claims seriously. But Reade's fall short.

I would vote for Joe Biden if he boiled babies and ate them. He wasn't my candidate, but taking back the White House is that important. Four more years of Donald Trump will replace what remains of our democracy with unchecked rule by kleptocrats, fascists, religious fanatics, gun nuts, and know-nothings. The environment? Education? The rights of voters, workers, immigrants, people of color, and yes, women? Forget them. And not just for the next four years: A Trump victory will lock down the courts for decades.

Fortunately, I may not have to sacrifice morality to political necessity. I take women's accusations very seriously, but there have always been reasons to be skeptical about this one. To believe Tara Reade, who claims that she was sexually assaulted by Biden in 1993, when she was a staffer in his Senate office, you have to believe that he put her up against a wall and penetrated her with his fingers on the spur of the moment in a hallway in the Capitol complex, where she says she went looking for him to give him his gym bag. This corridor, which she can't precisely identify, is a public space. (Her lawyer said he assaulted her in "a semi-private area like an alcove.") Indeed, Reade told Megyn Kelly that before she caught up with Biden, he was talking to another person. It was the middle of a workday. To believe Reade, you have to believe Biden would take that risk.

Here are some of the difficulties I have with Reade's accusation:

§ *She has changed her story—not just added to it, as her defenders claim, but altered it over and over.* She has said she was essentially forced out, given one month to find a new job, but she has also said she left to follow her boyfriend to the Midwest, to pursue a career as an actress, and because she loved Russia and hated imperialism. She tweeted positively about Biden, aka "my old boss," and retweeted or liked tweets praising him for his work against sexual violence. Asked about her pro-Biden tweets, she said they came from an old account that had been hacked. Her supporters say it's not uncommon for women who have been assaulted to speak about the perpetrator favorably after the episode. OK, but do those women also say they were hacked?

In 2018 she wrote adulatory pieces for *Medium* about, of all people, Vladimir Putin. She later deleted them and now says that she lost faith in Putin when she learned of Russia's decriminalization of domestic violence—but she liked a tweet from Chelsea Handler about the new Russian law a year before. She also said that her pieces were part of a novel. (They are straightforward opinion pieces.) She told Kelly her quasi-erotic gushing over Putin's irresistibility to women was supposed to be humorous. It is hard to believe she is a Russian agent, as some have claimed. To me, the Putin pieces are of interest because they are so bizarre as to suggest some kind of mental instability.

Reade's claim of supposed retaliation by Biden's office exists in multiple versions, too. In 2019 she was interviewed by *The Union*, her local newspaper in California's Nevada County, as one of a group of women who came forward to complain about unwanted touching by Biden. Reade told the paper that she was deprived

of certain duties, placed in a windowless office, and ultimately pushed out of her job because she complained about his handsiness and refused to serve drinks at a fundraiser after a staffer told her Biden "liked her legs." Who was responsible for her problems in the office? The title of her *Medium* essay, "Powerful Men and the Women They Choose to Destroy," certainly seems to blame Biden. But she has also blamed his staff and said that he may not have known about her office troubles or even when she left her job. She told Kelly that when she encountered him in the Senate hallway just before the alleged assault, "he remembered my name." That sounds as if she didn't expect him to know who she was.

§ *The best reason to believe Reade is her corroborators. But if you examine their accounts closely, each of them falls short.* Reade said she

told her mother, now deceased, about the assault and that her mother urged her to go to the police. She said her mother called in anonymously to Larry King, and a video of that call has come to light—but her mother mentioned only that her daughter had been working for a "prominent senator" and had "problems" that she couldn't get help for. Reade's brother, when first interviewed by *The Washington Post*, said nothing about assault; having spoken to the left-wing journalist Nathan Robinson, a fervent Reade partisan, her brother texted the *Post* a few days later and said he now remembered

her saying that Biden put "his hands under her clothes." Lorraine Sanchez, who worked with Reade from 1994 to 1996, said Reade told her about sexual harassment but not assault. An anonymous friend said Reade told her in 2006 or '07 that she had been harassed. No mention of assault. A 1996 affidavit recently surfaced in which Reade's ex-husband said she told him she was sexually harassed when she worked in Biden's office. No mention of assault.

Two friends come closest to corroborating the assault. One is an anonymous woman who met Reade when they both worked on Capitol Hill. Last year the woman corroborated Reade's claim that Biden had touched her neck and shoulders but said it wasn't sexual, which is also what Reade said at the time. When Reade claimed assault this past March, the friend corroborated that, too, and said she had kept Reade's confidences because "it just wasn't my place." In other words, she lied for her friend.

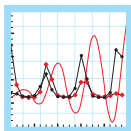
The second corroborator is Lynda LaCasse, Reade's neighbor in the mid-'90s. In an interview with Rich McHugh of *Business Insider*, LaCasse said Reade told her about the assault in 1995 or '96 but admitted she had forgotten about it until Reade reminded her.

McHUGH: When did this come on your radar again?

LaCASSE: Just recently. Tara called me and said, "Oh my
(continued on page 6)



Whether or not you believe Reade in your bones, the evidence is just not there.



THE SCORE/BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

CARES Bears Repeating

It is a tragedy that the most progressive part of the CARES Act, Congress's \$2 trillion response to the coronavirus crisis, is administered through one of our most broken systems. Increasing unemployment insurance is a standard response to any recession, and with so much of the economy shut down, it is particularly essential now. The CARES Act designed an unemployment insurance expansion to match the size of the economic fallout, but there have been significant problems in getting that money to workers. Those problems are slowly being solved, but there is now a second issue: The expansion expires at the end of July, and conservatives have said they will fight any extension of it. This should be expected. Republicans understand the stakes involved, even

Yet the program's administration has been improving. In May, according to an analysis from the Hamilton Project, states accounting for 88 percent of the labor force have been able to implement the expanded benefits, compared with only 24 percent a few weeks earlier. As the backlog clears, more people will make it through the system, the process will get faster, and workers will receive the payments they were due from earlier weeks.

That money will be absolutely crucial in dealing with this depression. According to estimates, unemployment insurance payments replaced roughly half of all worker income lost in April, and that share is likely increasing as the system keeps improving. By allowing workers to hold out until their jobs start again, this insurance will help the nation

transition to a recovery—but only if the program continues.

The structure of this expansion disproportionately benefits lower-wage workers, especially those employed in the service industries. The extra \$600 in each weekly payment was

an administrative workaround intended to compensate for the inability to quickly increase the amount of unemployment insurance state by state. For the lowest-wage workers, this supplemented insurance replaces income at 100 percent or more of previous wages. It also forces employers to raise wages and make working conditions better in order to keep employees, and it gives workers another option—one that they can imagine themselves exercising in the future. If extended, it would give workers real leverage to demand better conditions and higher wages. It's precisely this angle that has conservatives and bosses so adamant about preventing an extension.

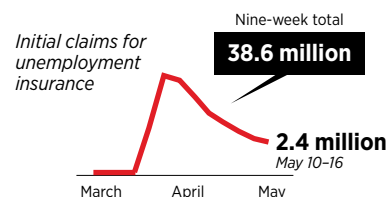
Finally, if this expansion of unemployment insurance continues, it may help reorient ideas about social insurance more generally. The idea of increasing, modernizing, and even federalizing unemployment insurance has disappeared from cutting-edge policy discussions in recent decades, with the focus moving instead toward a universal basic income and free public services. But unemployment insurance remains a vital part of economic freedom that only the public itself can provide. If it continues to be extended,

more people will understand that it could and should be expanded even further, especially to those workers whom our social insurance system doesn't cover well. Finding a way to provide economic security to our fractured labor force is one of the central goals of our time. Unemployment insurance will be part of that solution, and that's why it is worth fighting for.

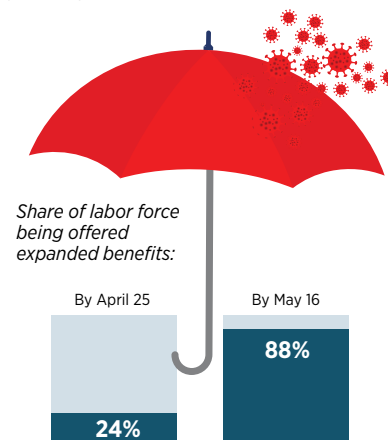
Mike Konczal

Unemployment Relief Is Now Reaching People

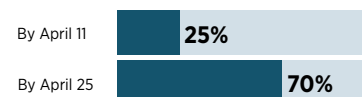
Millions of people are still losing their jobs each week.



After a slow start, expanded unemployment insurance is finally getting to laid-off workers.



Share of potential payments made to laid-off workers:



Sources: The Hamilton Project; US Department of Labor, March 21 data. 2020 infographic by Tracy Matsue Loeffelholz

Unemployment insurance remains a vital part of economic freedom.

if many liberals do not. Increasing unemployment insurance not only moves money to the lowest-wage workers, who need it the most, but it also empowers employees and builds the case for social insurance.

The expansion of unemployment insurance hit two structural hurdles. First, many states do not want the program to work well; they want to save money and stigmatize the unemployed. According to the National Employment Law Center, over the past decade many states have changed things so that fewer people qualify for unemployment insurance and get less of their income replaced when they do. The CARES Act overcame this by extending such insurance to contractors and gig workers and adding \$600 per week to each applicant's benefits, increasing how much income is replaced. The second problem pertains to how many people are losing their jobs. Some 30 million people applied for unemployment insurance in March and April; contrast that with the nearly 3 million people who applied each month during the peak of the Great Recession. Such an explosion in numbers would overwhelm any state system that hasn't been upgraded—and almost none of them have.

IN MEMORIAM (1948–2020)

Frederika Randall

“I was born in the USA in a time of privilege and plenty,” wrote Frederika Randall, *The Nation*’s longtime Rome correspondent, who died on May 12, to begin the self-portrait on her website. A mordantly funny, never-in-the-least-dispassionate observer, she was an acute chronicler of the postwar death spiral of Italian democracy.

Silvio Berlusconi’s description of his onetime factotum Vittorio Mangano—a Cosa Nostra boss later sentenced to life imprisonment for two murders—as “a hero” was, she wrote in 2008, “as close as he could get to making an outright promise to Italy’s Mafia that they would have a free hand if he were elected.” Ten years later, she was reporting on Berlusconi’s anti-immigrant coalition partners, the Lega, and their leader, Matteo Salvini. In between she alerted readers to the fratricide destroying Italy’s political left, the rise of former comedian Beppe Grillo’s Five Star movement, and the links between austerity, corruption, and the appeal of *Don Giovanni*.

But any attempt to corral Randall’s interests into the trim precincts of political journalism would be an injustice. A writer and prizewinning translator—her versions of Guido Morselli’s *Dissipatio H.G.* and the same author’s novel of postwar disillusion, *The Communist*, are published by New York Review Books Classics—Randall, as her son Tommaso Jucker put it on Twitter, “lived at least three lives.” We are fortunate that at least a portion of one of them was in our pages. —D.D. Guttenplan

(continued from page 4)

gosh, this Joe Biden thing is coming up again.” I said, “Oh my God, that.” I had forgotten about it.

When interviewed by Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now!*, LaCasse seemed to say she always remembered it. (Reade “told me about the allegations. And I said, ‘Oh, yes, I remember that.’”) But when asked about her own support for Biden, she said something a little strange: “It’s a difficult thing. I’ve always supported him. And I just have to keep supporting him now. And it’s a little bit harder now, after this allegation.” That certainly sounds as if the allegation was new information, not something she always remembered.

Are these friends telling the truth? It’s hard to say. Memory is a funny thing, and these conversations would have happened more than 20 years ago. However, the anonymous friend said she didn’t just withhold part of the story but confirmed something that she knew was false. And it seems odd that the thing LaCasse said she had forgotten is the most shocking piece of the story, the piece that was added just this year and the only reason we are talking about Reade now.

§ *Why did Reade come forward when she did?* She has blamed the media; the sharp remark of a journalist at *The Union* shut her down. Reade is a strong supporter of Bernie Sanders, and it may be relevant that her story came out in the pro-Sanders media—*The Katie Halper Show*, *The Intercept*—just as Biden was emerging as the presumptive nominee. On Super Tuesday she responded to a tweet from *The Intercept*’s Ryan Grim, who wrote, “A head-to-head Biden v Sanders contest will force voters to take a close look at Biden again. That went very badly for him last time.” Reade replied, “Yup. Timing... wait for it....tic toc.” That certainly sounds as if she was being strategic about how and when she released her accusation. (Reade told Kelly she was referring to the survivors’ advocacy organization Time’s Up, which she hoped would find her a lawyer. But why would she allude to that in response to a tweet about Super Tuesday?)

Do plenty of famous, powerful men molest less-powerful women? Of course. Many studies show that most women who say they have been sexually assaulted are telling the truth. However, when you’re dealing with actual individuals, it isn’t good enough to go with generalities. Otherwise, you get arguments like those of the feminist philosopher Kate Manne, who wrote in *The Nation* that Biden is “the type” of man who would sexually assault Reade because he has “a demonstrated history of handsiness.” That’s like saying a shoplifter is “the type” of person to commit armed robbery. Touching women, invading their space, looking them up and down are all regrettably common, especially among men of Biden’s generation; impulsively assaulting a staffer in a public

hallway, not so much. Both behaviors may spring from “the same sense of privileged male entitlement,” but they are different in kind.

Manne took my colleague Joan Walsh to task for writing in a recent opinion piece that there is “no evidence” that Biden sexually assaulted Reade. Reade’s accusation is itself evidence, Manne wrote, “though there remains room to disagree on its strength or probative value.” I don’t understand that. Allegations should lead to further investigation, but they are not evidence on their own. If I allege that my business partner cheated me or my doctor committed malpractice, that is not evidence that the person did so. It is just my claim. Evidence is what I bring to support my allegation, not the allegation itself. To say otherwise is to argue that all accused people rightly start out with one strike against them. After all, someone accused them. Smoke, meet fire.

If every piece of evidence for an accusation is a brick and there’s something the matter with each of them, do you have a wall or just a pile of bricks? I think you have a pile of bricks. As I write, Reade’s story seems to be falling apart. *PBS NewsHour* has posted an article based on interviews with 74 Biden staffers who spoke highly of their boss and his respectful behavior toward women. One staffer, who worked with Reade, said her office problems had to do with her poor performance at the task they shared: answering mail from constituents. Another said the serving-drinks request never would have happened, because Biden did not want women to do such menial tasks. More than 50 said that as staffers they never attended fundraisers, and some mentioned an office policy barring most staffers from campaign work. *NewsHour* reporters investigated the hallway where the assault is alleged to have happened and determined that there was no “semi-private area like an alcove,” as her lawyer claimed, where Biden could have assaulted Reade unseen.

An article in *Politico* portrays Reade as a manipulative, dishonest user who exploited acquaintances and kind people who tried to help her over the years and who always spoke proudly of her time working for Biden. Of course, liars can be raped, users can be raped, people who skip out on the rent can be raped. But it is an intentional misreading to say, as some have claimed, that the article slams Reade for being poor. Very few poor people trick veterinarians into billing others for medical care for their pet horse.

We may never get to the bottom of this to

Do plenty of famous, powerful men assault less-powerful women? Yes. But when dealing with individuals, generalities are not enough.



everyone's satisfaction. I certainly won't be holding my breath waiting for the journalists who ran with this story on very little evidence to climb down, let alone apologize. On Twitter, Biden is still a rapist and perhaps always will be. Meanwhile, Reade and her supporters have made it harder for the next woman who claims to have been sexually harassed, assaulted, or raped.

Here's what I do know: Whether or not you believe Tara Reade, you should vote for Joe Biden if he is the nominee. And he is almost certain to be the nominee, despite the best efforts of some Sanders supporters to use Reade to force him to step aside. Moreover, there is nothing hypocritical about feminists supporting Biden. We have a perfect right to support the candidate who will be better for women than the one who will send us back to the 1950s. Not only is Reade's claim far from proven, but weighing the personal against the political is what voters do all the time. Black Virginians stuck with Gover-

nor Ralph Northam despite his blackface scandal. Were they hypocrites? This won't be the first time Americans have had to swallow their pride and support a politician who, whatever his faults, served their interests.

I realize Democrats and those to their left care deeply about their principles. Al Franken was hustled out of the Senate, after all, on the basis of far less serious allegations than Reade's. But we need to take a leaf from the evangelicals, who don't give a hoot that 25 women have accused Trump of various kinds of misconduct or that he paid hush money to a porn star. What they do care about is what he will do for their issues—install Supreme Court justices who will overturn *Roe v. Wade*, for starters.

Whether or not you feel in your bones that Reade is telling the truth, the evidence is just not there. We do not have the luxury of sitting out the election to feel morally pure or send a message about sexual assault and #BelieveWomen. That will not help women at all. Or anyone else. ■

This won't be the first time Americans have had to swallow their pride and support a politician who, whatever his faults, served their interests.

SNAPSHOT / ELENA PERLINO

Taking Care

In France, health care workers have tended tirelessly to the sick and dying. For several weeks, I've documented the doctors, nurses, and support staff at one of Paris's major hospitals, the Groupe Hospitalier Paris Saint-Joseph. Here the body of someone who succumbed to Covid-19 awaits cremation or burial. —Elena Perlino

Calvin Trillin Deadline Poet

A FOURTH INSPECTOR GENERAL BITES THE DUST

The IG had Pompeo in his sights.
An IG's independence is required—
Or was. Pompeo needed just a word
With Trump to get that pesky fellow fired.



DRAWING THE NATION

They Were All Essential

During this pandemic, I have found the losses to be overwhelming and numbing. I decided to use illustration to reflect on the lives abruptly ended by Covid-19. I've been posting my drawings on social media (Instagram:

@sbrodner; Twitter: @stevebrodner). I found stories of workers, nursing home residents, and others. By drawing them, I discovered that through their eyes and expressions, we could perhaps sense their personalities. —Steve Brodner

TIFFANY MOFIELD,

PRISONER AT A NEW JERSEY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY, DIED LOCKED IN A SHOWER STALL, BEGGING AND SCREAMING THAT SHE COULDN'T BREATHE. SHE WAS 43. OVER 340 INCARCERATED PEOPLE HAVE DIED IN THE PANDEMIC.

IN OTHER NEWS, PAUL MANAFORT WAS RELEASED FROM PRISON DUE TO THE OUTBREAK.



WAYNE

EDWARDS, ELMHURST HOSPITAL WORKER, HELPED MANAGE MASKS, GLOVES, ETC. HIS KINDNESS WAS "LIKE A BOTTOMLESS PIT."

LOST IN THE PANDEMIC.



FRANCISCO MENDOZA,

BELOVED BOXING COACH, MEXICAN IMMIGRANT, EVENTUALLY OPENED A N.Y. BOXING GYM. A DOUBLE CANCER SURVIVOR. HE DIED IN THE PANDEMIC IN JERSEY CITY. "BOX WITH EVERYTHING YOU HAVE," HE WOULD TELL HIS BOXERS. HE WAS 61.



CELIA LARDIZABAL MARCOS,

NURSE AT HOLLYWOOD PRESBYTERIAN HOSPITAL, DIED AFTER TRYING TO RESUSCITATE A COVID-19 PATIENT. SHE WORKED WITHOUT PROPER EQUIPMENT DUE TO A SHORTAGE AT THE HOSPITAL. SHE CONTRACTED THE VIRUS AND DIED ON APRIL 17. SHE GAVE UP HER LIFE TO SAVE A PATIENT. SHE WAS 61.



GLOBAL CONNECTIONS TELEVISION

WITH **BILL MILLER**

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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country's second largest city.

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Global Connections Television (GCTV) is an independently-produced, privately-financed talk show that focuses on international issues and how they impact people worldwide. Global Connections Television features in-depth analysis of important current issues and events including climate change, environmental sustainability, economic development, global partnerships, renewable energy, technology, culture, education, food security, poverty reduction, peace and security, and gender issues.

Episodes are broadcast worldwide through cable, satellite, public-access television, and the World Wide Web. GCTV provides inside perspectives from the United Nations and other important organizations that showcase how these groups impact the daily lives of people around the world.

GCTV GLOBAL CONNECTIONS
TELEVISION
WITH BILL MILLER

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Within the goal of providing important perspectives and initiatives from the UN and other organizations, Global Connections Television is provided to broadcasters, satellite systems, media outlets and educational institutions at no charge subject to terms and conditions found on our website. GCTV believes that by providing this invaluable content, the public can learn more about the world, its issues, and the men and women making a difference.

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BIG

In times of
crisis, ideas
that were once
considered
radical can
enter the
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Time to
Think

The Nation.

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BY MIKE DAVIS

IN WILLIAM STYRON'S 1979 NOVEL *SOPHIE'S CHOICE*, LATER MADE INTO A FILM THAT WON Meryl Streep an Academy Award, a young Polish woman named Sophie Zawistowska arrives at Auschwitz with her two children. She begs a Nazi camp doctor not to send her kids to the gas chambers. He offers her a sadistic choice: He'll allow one to live, but she must choose which one. Otherwise he'll gas both.

Imagine another Sophie: a 34-year-old single mom from Rock Springs, Wyo., who waits tables at a huge crowded truck stop on Interstate 80. There's a high incidence of the coronavirus in environments like this, but her boss forbids her to wear a face mask, saying, "The drivers want to see your smile." Her ex has been laid off from his job as a roustabout in a nearby oil field and can't pay alimony. She's a month overdue on her mortgage

and desperately needs income. But her mother, who lives with her and takes care of Sophie's toddler while she works the night shift, has severe emphysema and relies on an oxygen tank. How does she choose between her job and the risk of transmitting the infection to her mom?

Tens of millions of American workers have had to make or will have to make their own equivalent of Sophie's choice. A *Washington Post*/Ipsos poll at the beginning of May found that more than a third of people who work outside their homes had a serious preexisting health condition or someone in their home who did. "Roughly 7 in 10 black and Hispanic workers said they were worried about getting a household member sick if they are exposed at work," the *Post* noted.

In some states and industries, people are being forced back to work in hazardous conditions, still without adequate protection. Thousands have died because of Donald Trump's heartless refusal to use the full extent of his powers under the Defense Production Act to ramp up the manufacture of personal protective equipment (PPE), but he has forcefully invoked the act to compel meat industry employees to return to processing lines, where they stand shoulder to shoulder for long hours in the cold—an environment almost as unsafe as being in a prison or a nursing home. The United Food and Commercial Workers, which represents employees in meatpacking as well as others in food distribution and grocery chains, reported in late April that at least 74 members had died as a result of workplace-contracted coronavirus infections.

The Department of Labor, meanwhile, has ruled that workers who refuse to return to the job because of fear of infection are ineligible for expanded unemployment benefits; it has threatened that some could be considered as potential felons engaged in "unemployment fraud." At the department's urging, Ohio and Iowa have set up Internet hotlines to allow employers to anonymously report such individuals. Recalcitrant slaves must be whipped back to work.

Unless they fight back. Refusing to die for profits or endanger family members, rank-and-file workers have rebelled on a scale not seen since the early 1970s. Since mid-March, the useful Covid-19 Class Struggle timeline maintained by Marx21 has recorded at least 350 job actions. The real number could be as high as 500, and it's growing every day.

While National Nurses United, the Service Employees

International Union, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, and a few other unions have sponsored walkouts, most have been informal protests or wildcat strikes, often coordinated by militant organizing campaigns such as Amazonians United, Whole Worker, Fight for \$15, Target Workers Unite, and the Gig Workers Collective. Though some may receive support and financing from the SEIU and others, these are autonomous groups committed to inside organizing in the mode of the early Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). They banded together to organize the nationwide Essential Workers General Strike on May Day, when employees stayed home or demonstrated during lunchtime.

The rebellion naturally flies a rainbow flag. From the very beginning, African American workers—including bus drivers in Detroit and Birmingham, poultry workers in Georgia, Kroger warehouse workers in Memphis, sanitation workers in Pittsburgh and New Orleans, and fast food workers in Chicago and North Carolina—have been out front leading wildcat strikes against unsafe working conditions.

Asian American nurses, likewise, have stood outside hospitals in several dozen protests demanding PPE. Mexican immigrants are a backbone of resistance in Midwestern meat processing plants and in Washington's Yakima Valley, which has the most per capita infections on the West Coast. Eight fruit-packing plants have gone on strike in an area notorious for the brutal suppression of farmworkers' organizing campaigns.

The new movement has shown tactical genius in making protests safe by reviving the CIO's old secret weapons: auto picket lines and solidarity convoys. Fight for \$15 in Los Angeles and Chicago, where the demands include hazard pay, sick leave, and PPE, has repeatedly mobilized members to slowly circle in drive-through lines to disrupt unsafe business as usual at McDonald's, El Pollo Loco, and other major franchises. In Chicago the local Democratic Socialists of America chapter has supported the campaign with placard-carrying caravans.

These are not just the stirrings of revolt but an ever-broadening insurgency led from the grass roots. But don't expect to hear much about it on CNN or from *The Wash-*

**Tens of thousands of dispirited activists—
young people who otherwise might be roaring like lions in the streets—
wait at home for instructions that never come.**

*Mike Davis is a Nation contributing editor. His latest book, *Set the Night on Fire*: L.A. in the Sixties, coauthored with Jon Wiener, is out now.*

ington Post. Most newsrooms are mesmerized instead by the gun-toting mobs on the steps of state capitols screaming for an end to the quarantine. (Neo-Nazis with assault rifles always guarantee prime-time coverage; that's why the shrewd media tacticians in Trump world promote their participation.)

This reopen movement, of course, is completely orchestrated from the top down by the same right-wing operatives and billionaire sponsors who concocted the Tea Party. There are two networks involved. One, Save Our Country, rewarms the alliance between FreedomWorks, Tea Party Patriots, the American Legislative Exchange Council, and the anti-abortion Susan B. Anthony List, with lavish funding from oilmen, defense contractors, and interests linked to the DeVos family. The other, Open the States, which operates the principal digital platform for the protests, grows out of a project originally financed by hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer, Trump's most important backer in 2016.

As they have proved on innumerable occasions since the days of Ronald Reagan and the tax revolt, conservatives have a sophisticated understanding of the role of angry crowds and rude protests in winning elections and wielding power. Meanwhile, no centrist Democrat would think of issuing pitchforks to the base; their role, rather, is to disarm the movements that put them in office.

This certainly seems to be the mindset in the Joe Biden bunker; otherwise his camp would have realized in early March what an exceptional opportunity existed to build a national protest movement around worker safety and Trump's refusal to nationalize and speed the production of test kits and PPE. What if—safely attired in PPE—"good ole Joe" had walked a picket line with striking nurses or dipped into his campaign treasury to fund ads built around the stories of people like Sophie the waitress?

Likewise, the Democrats could have raced to the rescue of the multitudes dying in nursing homes because the owners—reactionary private equity firms and piratical partnerships—were basically in the business of bilking Medicare instead of creating safe, infection-free environments for their residents. Nancy Pelosi could have scheduled emergency House hearings in April to expose the slaughter and demand immediate federal intervention.

Instead she has ruled the House with an iron hand, forcing her troops to vote for bipartisan relief bills that have awarded hundreds of billions of dollars of aid to big corporations and wealthy owners of nonunion companies. Only a handful of progressives, led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Pramila Jayapal, have resisted the pressure to accept such compromises without protest.

Those of us who love Bernie Sanders must recognize

that he has not been an adequate counterforce against the inaction and parliamentary cretinism of the Democratic Party's leadership under Pelosi and Biden. As always, Sanders applauds the strikers and pushes pro-worker solutions, but his energy seems mainly focused on negotiating with Biden over the role of progressive policies and people in a new administration.

As a result, tens of thousands of dispirited and disoriented activists—young people who otherwise might be roaring like lions in the streets—wait at home for instructions that never come. The vaunted dialectic of campaign as movement and vice versa increasingly looks like a one-way route to a very traditional destination.

But neither working families nor unemployed young adults can wait for a Biden inauguration, a second New Deal, or the Resurrection. The crisis, the impossible choices, are here and now. Body counts are again rising in some of the red states that reopened early—and no vaccine will arrive for at least half a year to make workplaces safe.

Also living precariously in the present are local and state governments, public colleges, and the US Postal Service, and without the nearly \$1 trillion in aid promised in the Democrats' Heroes Bill, they'll soon be unable to meet the cost of expanded Medicaid and unemployment coverage, keep open public hospitals, operate public schools at 2019 levels, or prevent further, massive job losses in the public sector.

In the Senate, Mitch McConnell's relief bills typically contain no rescue package for the public sector while demanding massive aid for the airlines and other major private-sector employers. By confronting the Democrats with a blue-government apocalypse, Republicans once again expect that Pelosi and Chuck Schumer will make devastating compromises.

Progressive Democrats in Congress, state legislatures, and city governments should refuse to pay a price in lives for the sake of party unity and a trickle down of relief. It's time to end the phony war and take back the streets.

The first step is to support and publicize every example of workplace resistance, as well as the growing wave of rent strikes and fights to save the Postal Service and public education. The second should be a call for a National Day of Resistance in August, if not sooner.

Perhaps the most important duty of socialists, however, is to ensure that Sanders's base is not further demobilized. We need to show them that there is a campaign—apart from the November elections—that calls for thousands of dedicated organizers and volunteers. Following the example of insurgent essential workers, we need to put real fire back into the hearth of solidarity. ■



What if, safely attired in PPE, "good ole Joe" had walked a picket line with striking nurses?





HEALTH CARE

'A Moment of Ethical Reckoning'

By now, even Donald Trump knows that Covid-19 is hitting communities of color hardest. Could this be a turning point?

ZOË CARPENTER

JASON HARGROVE WAS DRIVING A BUS through the west side of Detroit when one of his passengers began to cough, failing to cover her mouth. It was March 21, and Covid-19 was spreading through cities across the United States. Hargrove was rattled. "Hey, look," he said in a Facebook Live video taken on his lunch break, which quickly racked up tens of thousands of views. "This coronavirus shit is for real, and we [are] out here as public workers doing our jobs, trying to make an honest living to take care of our families.... That shit was uncalled for. I feel violated."

A few days later, he developed a fever and told his wife, Desha Johnson-Hargrove, he felt "kind of off." Soon after, he was sick enough that she took him to a hospital. He was sent home with orders to self-quarantine. He kept getting sicker. When his fingertips turned blue, she took him back to the hospital. The staffers sent him home again. "They said that there was no reason to do anything," she later told a journalist. By March 29, he was struggling to breathe, and she took him to the hospital a third time. She never saw him alive again. It was only when she called to check on him that she learned her husband was dead.

Hargrove's death underscored the hazards that blue-collar essential workers face from the virus. In Detroit and across America, those workers are disproportionately people of color. Elder Leslie Mathews, a Detroit resident and an organizer with Michigan United, remembers seeing a checkered effect as people began to self-isolate in March. "White people working in these upscale type of [jobs], they begin to disappear. And the black and brown people are the frontline workers." Rumors had spread that

GUILLERMO SANTOS / NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

black people couldn't contract the virus, and when better information came out, "it was literally too late. It hit like an atomic bomb. It just came out of nowhere. And then next thing you know, hundreds of people are sick."

Forty percent of the people who have died from Covid-19 in Michigan so far were black, though they make up only 14 percent of the state's population. Nationally, one analysis found that black Americans have died from the virus at 2.4 times the rate of white Americans, and Hispanic and Native Americans have been infected at elevated rates in a number of states. Mathews has lost friends and relatives to Covid-19, including her ex-husband, who died after being discharged from a hospital. "He seems like he's doing well, and he's dead within a week," she said. "And then the next week his mother died. I'm looking at my Facebook, and every time you scroll, 'Rest in peace. Rest in peace. Rest in peace.'" She estimated that at least 10 of her high school friends have died in recent weeks. "I'm used to being a person who can help people, guide people through the loss of their loved ones and mourn. This Covid-19 literally has snatched all of that away."

As the pandemic spread, states and the federal government were slow to release demographic data showing who was getting sick and who was dying. Once the racial disparities became indisputable, public officials across the political spectrum declared the statistics unacceptable. "They're very nasty numbers. Terrible numbers," President Trump said at an April 7 press conference. But what are they willing to do to change them?

Many public health experts are hopeful that the vast scale of the crisis will prompt meaningful political action to counter health inequities, which have been persistent and well documented in America for well over a century. Dr. Clyde W. Yancy of Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine recently described this as "a moment of ethical reckoning." "There is a sense that this is getting more media attention than other disparities, and I'm hoping that when all is said and done, there is special attention and funding and resources paid to these issues," said Uché Blackstock, an emergency physician in New York and the founder and CEO of the consulting practice Advancing Health Equity.

But as states begin reopening businesses and relaxing social distancing guidelines, there is still nothing resembling a coordinated effort to address the pandemic, much less its disparate impact. "I think that people have become very numb to black communities suffering," Blackstock said in late April. "What can we do right now, structurally, to mitigate the effect of this dangerous virus? I haven't heard that. I haven't heard a solutions piece."

Recognizing the urgency of the moment, civil rights groups and organizers like Mathews are working to get immediate relief to vulnerable communities while pressing elected officials to center racial equity in their policy responses to the pandemic. "People are angry," said Mathews, who has been leading virtual town halls with Detroit residents. "I believe that there is a great awakening now."



Targeted response: Under pressure, city officials in New York added testing sites in predominantly black neighborhoods, including in Harlem.

"A pandemic is in some ways about the pathogen but in so many more ways about the host and the environment."

—Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, former executive director, Detroit Health Department

WHILE COVID-19 IS NOVEL, ITS IMPACT AT THE community level was predictable: Whether from infection, chronic disease, or natural disasters, people of color and the poor tend to suffer disproportionately. The idea of Covid-19 as "the great equalizer" was not only an inaccurate assumption but also a damaging one. Taking a colorblind approach to the virus meant that public officials missed early opportunities to blunt its lopsided impact.

The most obvious missed opportunity was in not making testing widely available, especially in vulnerable communities. Initially, testing was limited to people who had traveled to countries where the virus was prevalent, including China and Iran, or who had been in close contact with someone who'd tested positive. "It was very clear to me from the outset that that excluded certain patients, and those were mostly black patients in the neighborhoods that I work in," said Blackstock, who practices in central Brooklyn.

Most states are not reporting demographic data for testing, but in Illinois, which does, black residents received fewer than 10 percent of Covid-19 tests as of May 22, though they accounted for 30 percent of deaths and 17 percent of confirmed cases. In Philadelphia, an analysis by Drexel University epidemiologist Usama Bilal found that people living in higher-income zip codes were tested at almost six times the rate that residents of poorer areas were. Ala Stanford, a pediatric surgeon, grew so frustrated by the limited diagnostics in the city that she and other volunteers formed the Black Doctors Covid-19 Consortium, which has offered free testing in church parking lots and people's homes.

Under pressure, some state and city officials, including in New York City and Florida's Broward County, added testing sites in predominantly black neighborhoods. In Detroit, officials opened a drive-through site on state fairgrounds. But more than a third of Detroit residents don't have a car, presenting another hurdle, which the city tried to navigate by signing up taxi companies to give \$2 rides to the site.

In addition to testing and demographic data, a priority for many grassroots groups has been reducing the number of people in jails, prisons, and immigration detention centers, where access to soap, other cleaning supplies, and health care is limited. According to the ACLU, African Americans make up more than half the prison population in several states with big racial gaps in their rates of Covid-related infections, including Michigan, Illinois, and Louisiana. Again, the response has been scattershot: While many local governments have reduced the number of people in jail by 25 percent or more, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, state prisons have released "almost no one." The organization's Emily Widra and Peter Wagner write, "For the most part, states are not even taking the simplest and least controversial steps, like

refusing admissions for technical violations of probation and parole rules, and to release those that are already in confinement for those same technical violations.” Meanwhile, more than 1,100 detainees in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody have tested positive for Covid-19—almost half of those who have been tested.

Workplace protections are another area where political leaders could do more to mitigate the spread of the virus. “The idea that we don’t have guaranteed wages, [universal] hazard pay...[stronger] OSHA regulations to make sure that workers have safe conditions—none of that stuff is in place to protect those that are most susceptible to this virus and are the least able to access health care,” said Dr. Sharrelle Barber, a social epidemiologist at Drexel University and a coordinator of the Poor People’s Campaign’s newly formed Covid-19 Health Justice Advisory Committee. Nearly one-fourth of civilian workers in the United States have no paid sick days, and while the federal coronavirus response package passed in March provided two weeks of paid sick leave for some employees, companies with more than 500 people or fewer than 50 are exempt, a loophole that leaves out millions of workers. “Almost all around, we’ve left communities to fend for themselves,” Barber said. “It’s been just really frustrating, really infuriating, to watch the level of neglect we’re seeing.”

WITH NO COORDINATION OR STRATEGY HAPPENING at the federal level, various states and cities have set up task forces to study and propose responses to the asymmetrical impact of the pandemic. Chicago announced the formation of a Racial Equity Rapid Response Team in early April in partnership with West Side United, aiming to “bring a hyper local public health strategy to targeted communities.” Michigan and Louisiana have established statewide task forces. At the federal level, Senator Kamala Harris introduced a bill that would require the Department of Health and Human Services to create a racial and ethnic disparities task force.

It’s unclear whether these expert panels will have an impact. “The primary function of this task force cannot be to engage in a long, protracted process of deliberation and study, dwelling on how we got here,” New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams said in response to the formation of a city task force. “Ultimately, we need results, not a report,” Andre Perry, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, told me. “I get invited to racial equity task forces all the time, and while I love doing research, research is not needed in this area. Checks cut to black and brown people are what’s needed.”

The drivers of racial health disparities are well documented. People of color are more likely than whites to live in segregated neighborhoods with more pollution, unsafe housing, and limited access to health care, nutritious foods, and economic opportunity. Those and other social and environmental factors can lead to poor health outcomes, including higher rates of chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension, which have been associated with Covid-19 deaths. “A pandemic is in some ways about the pathogen but in so many more ways about the host and the environment,” said Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, a former



“It was clear to me from the outset that [testing criteria] excluded certain patients, and those were mostly black patients in the neighborhoods that I work in.”

—Dr. Uché Blackstock, emergency physician in New York

On the front lines:

People of color are disproportionately represented among workers who can’t work from home, making them more vulnerable to the coronavirus.

executive director of the Detroit Health Department. “Detroit, as an environment, is a place that has been beating up on the host—predominantly black and low-income folks in the city—for a really, really long time.”

Compounding these environmental factors is bias within the medical system. Numerous studies show that black patients receive worse care than white patients. Although it’s difficult to say whether bias is a factor in individual cases, there are many stories of people like Hargrove who were turned away from hospitals multiple times, only to die later. (Hospitals have generally denied accusations of bias regarding Covid-19 patients, pointing instead to capacity issues that required them to admit only the severest cases.)

There’s evidence that systemic racism affects health in more subtle ways, too. In the 1990s, Arline Geronimus, a professor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, coined the term “weathering” to describe the way that discrimination wears away at the body, leading to early onset of chronic disease and other poor health outcomes, even as people move up the economic ladder. “There’s this accelerated biological aging that’s caused by chronic exposure to stressors and high-effort coping with stressors [from] living in a structurally racist system,” she explained. She said this may be one of the reasons Covid-19 is hitting communities of color particularly hard. Historically, though, policy interventions to address racial disparities have focused on changing individual behaviors. Geronimus and others argue that what’s needed are structural changes aimed at rooting out discrimination and bias.

Recently, some local governments have started to acknowledge the link between discrimination and poor health. Last year Milwaukee became the one the first cities in the United States to declare racism a public health crisis. Milwaukee is one of the country’s most segregated metro areas: Wisconsin’s mortality rate for black infants is the highest among the states, and Milwaukee has one of the most-incarcerated zip codes in the country. The point of the resolution was to make racial equity a core element

(continued on page 19)



tions and unions nationwide to tax corporations and the superrich, thus increasing our chances of actually winning on the progressive policies that pile up year after year with no hope of ever being put into practice.

According to Stephen Moore, the first president of the virulently anti-tax conservative political machine known as the Club for Growth, in an opinion he penned in 1998 as the fiscal policy chief at the Cato Institute:

Political analysts often argue about when the modern-day conservative movement in America began. Some say that it began with Barry Goldwater's campaign in 1964. Others say it began with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. I believe that the conservative, anti-big-government tide in America began 20 years ago with the passage of... Proposition 13 in California. Proposition 13 was a political earthquake.... It also incited a nationwide tax revolt at the state and local levels. Within five years of Proposition 13's passage, nearly half the states strapped a similar straitjacket on politicians' tax-raising capabilities.

Proposition 13 rolled back property taxes to 1975 levels and then capped them at 1 percent of the property's assessed value, taking a slow-moving, often hard-to-see wrecking ball to funding for public schools and city and county budgets. In addition, deploying right-wing strategic savvy in going for structural long-term change rather than short-term gain, the proposition amended the state's Constitution, henceforth requiring any state tax increase to pass by a minimum two-thirds vote in the legislature and any local tax initiatives to get approval from at least two-thirds of voters. Meanwhile, cutting taxes requires only a simple majority. (Statewide ballot initiatives like the one that raised taxes on the rich in 2012 also require only a simple majority, but getting an initiative on the ballot entails a whole other set of legal hurdles and organizing expenses.)

Anthony Thigpenn, a longtime organizer and the brains behind the millionaire tax and its extension, is now spearheading the challenge to Prop 13, called the Schools and Communities First ballot initiative. As he notes, "The passage of Prop 13 was part of the racist backlash to the social movements of the '60s, the battles to desegregate schools, and the large-scale entry of workers of color into unionized public sector jobs." The conservative movement behind the measure campaigned on saving Californians money, but the very same players behind Prop 13 were also resisting fair housing laws, school busing, and school integration. Its real objectives were clearly racist.

The genius of Schools and Communities First is that it focuses exclusively on closing a giant corporate loophole that never should have been part of the original law, by removing commercial property from Prop 13's protections. Called a split-roll initiative, the measure will result in \$12 billion being funneled back into public schools and local governments. And if this measure was important

in the pre-Covid-19 days, it's crucial now. Says Thigpenn, "In this time of deep health and economic crisis, the strategic significance is that rather than accepting austerity budgets, which increase economic and racial inequality, we are challenging corporate dominance and providing resources for schools and communities with a racial justice lens."

To explain its repeated success in what few progressives have achieved—taxing corporations and the rich and renewing the public sector's funding base—the coalition points to its political analysis, which holds that economic, gender, and racial justice are inseparable, and its strategy, which combines serious political education and deep organizing to expand its rank-and-file base. Rather than pop up every four years, spend a lot of money, and then shut down (as far too many electoral campaigns do), these organizations have worked consistently on expanding the universe of people they can mobilize when it's time to turn out the vote.



The lesson for progressives is clear: In order to win, we need a long view, not an electoral-cycle view.

Taxing behavior: California's then-Governor Jerry Brown at a 2012 rally to pass Proposition 30, which imposed a state surtax on high-income earners.



The labor unions key to this effort all have memberships rooted in the mission-driven sector of today's service economy: the California Teachers Association, the California Federation of Teachers, and the California State Council of the Service Employees International Union. And dozens of membership-based community groups—often dismissed by the national players—have coalesced into the California Calls coalition. On the union side, some of the earliest supporters came from the leadership of United Teachers of Los Angeles, whose 34,000 members waged an incredibly successful all-out strike in 2019. The impetus to get the statewide education unions behind these efforts began with progressive teacher-leaders in UTLA in 2011 and continued last year with another major education union that waged and won a successful strike, the Oakland Education Association. Across the state, local unions and community-based groups work together to determine who has the strongest base in a given area, taking assignments for critical voter education work in order to complement one another's efforts. Instead of wasting time and resources by talking to the same voters, this approach allows the coalition's members to spread their resources strategically.

For progressives across the nation, the lesson from these efforts in California is clear: To win, we need a long view, not an electoral-cycle view. Alone, neither the unions nor the community-based groups could have won in 2012 or 2016; to win in 2020, it will likewise require deep and honest collaboration. The unions involved are ones that have real relationships, not merely transactional ones, with their rank and file. The community-based groups, too, have membership bases in which ordinary

people exercise real agency; they are not advocacy groups that merely speak on behalf of the poor. To win all across America, to stand a chance to push back against massive Covid austerity, will require commitment by unions that have first learned to rebuild their supermajority strike muscle, carrying their big numbers and organization into supermajority political participation. It will also require forging real partnerships with bottom-up, community-based organizations that have been all but ignored by the big foundations and big donors. Winning, in short, is not about shortcuts; it's about deep organizing. ■



Travel time: For over a century, people have trekked hours to and from New York City each day for a paycheck.

COMMUTES

Farewell, the Daily Slog

Americans waste hundreds of hours commuting each year, ballooning their carbon footprints. What if they just... stopped?

ELIE MYSTAL

LIKE MORE THAN HALF OF AMERICANS, I LIVE IN THE suburbs. Luckily, I don't have to commute to the city every day—or even wear pants—because I'm a writer. But if I had a real job, it would take me well over an hour to get from my door to *The Nation's* offices. As it is, going into New York City for a meeting starts with a 12-minute walk from my house to the commuter rail. That train takes 38 minutes to get to Grand Central station. I then spend about six minutes walking up and down various ramps to get to a subway. The subway

takes about eight minutes to get to Port Authority. From there it's a 10-minute walk to the office. And that's when everything is running on time. Everything takes longer if it's raining or snowing or if I'm hungover. The whole process has to be reverse engineered to get home.

That was before the coronavirus. Now commuting to a meeting takes one minute from my bedroom door to my desk chair. Sometimes I take the scenic route and chat with my wife on my way to work. I've gone two months without being within coughing distance of any office. Why would I ever go back? Why would anybody? Office workers have known forever that spending hours per day commuting is nonessential and a gigantic waste of time.

Suburban living isn't a phase. It's not new. Americans have been moving to the suburbs for nearly a century. That trend has had all sorts of deleterious social and political ramifications. Urban decay, white flight, housing market bubbles, and massively unequal school resources are just a few of the ills caused by suburbanization. And don't even get me started on the anodyne, sterile, normative consumerist "culture" championed by the suburban ideal.

It would be good for the country if the suburbs were razed to the studs and the land returned to nature. But since that's not going to happen, the pandemic is a great opportunity to finally bring our work expectations in line with how and where people actually live.

Despite technological advances that would look like

magic to Alexander Graham Bell, we've remained tied to an Industrial Revolution idea of workers showing up to the giant widget place so an overseer can motivate them to produce profits. Many nonservice industries have had the technology to exist without a centralized office for 30 years, and over the past 20, the Internet could have made a central office nearly obsolete. But until 10 weeks ago, most people were trudging in to work every day.

That's maddening because, while the technology is there to allow many people to work from home, the infrastructure is not there to support the overwhelming and ever-increasing number of commuters. Our infrastructure hasn't kept up with our suburban expansion (or any expansion, really). Our bridges and tunnels are crumbling. Our trains and buses are so inefficient that Europeans wonder why we don't set them aflame in riots. Our roads and highways are poisonous parking lots warming the planet one traffic jam at a time.

The negative environmental impact of commuting is undeniable. Studies show that the average drive to work adds 4.3 metric tons of carbon to the atmosphere a year—per car. If everyone in the US drove just 10 percent less, it would have the equivalent environmental effect of taking 28 coal-fueled power plants off-line for a year. And let's not forget: Commuting is unhealthy. People with longer commutes tend to be less physically active and have higher rates of obesity and high blood pressure. Every commuter has been told to take the stairs as a way to build in some daily exercise, but “don't spend three hours a day sitting on a train” is also solid physical fitness advice.

And that's where we were before Covid-19 made us more aware that our public transportation systems are petri dishes for communicable diseases. One of the most mind-blowing moments in the whole pandemic was when New York City announced, triumphantly, that it would start bleaching its subway cars every night. I did not know until that moment that I had spent most of my life riding around in yesterday's filth, not just today's. I'm going to need a hazmat suit before I get on the subway again.

I simply cannot fathom a world in which the pandemic is declared over and everybody starts commuting to work again. I do not think that we can go back to expecting people to fork over hours and hours a day sitting in traffic or trapped on a disease tube simply because they have a meeting. Zoom or Skype or Google Hangouts might not be the ideal way to conduct face-to-face business, but the lockdown has shown that any number of daily, mind-numbing check-in meetings can be handled remotely.

There will be resistance to allowing people to work from home after the pandemic has passed. What's the point of having a sweet corner office if nobody's there to cower outside it? Working from home robs many bosses and brownnosers of some of their favorite methods for doling out favors and establishing loyalty. When everybody is working remotely, the work kind of has to stand for itself. But that's a bad paradigm if you're a talentless man who has your job only because your dad and the boss are golfing buddies. There are a lot of people whose only professional skill is laughing at their boss's jokes at happy hour, and those people can't wait to get back to the office.

But the raw efficiency of working from home will, with any luck, cause most offices to embrace working remotely. Now that people have had this taste of managing their own time like the adults they've always been, dragging them back into a daily routine of inefficiency and health risks will be hard. Telecommuting was one of the big ideas to emerge in the late 20th century. In the post-pandemic 21st century, it might finally become a reality. ■

(continued from page 15)

of all decision-making, and it may have contributed to the fact that Milwaukee was more transparent than other locales about data showing disproportionate deaths early in the pandemic.

Dr. Dierdre Cooper Owens, a historian of medicine at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, has argued that the federal government should issue a similar declaration in response to Covid-19. She argues that racism meets the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's criteria for declaring a public health threat: It puts a significant burden on society, it disproportionately affects part of the population, current measures to address it are inadequate, and a coordinated, broad approach is necessary in response. “Most white Americans do not like to have conversations around racism,” Cooper Owens told me. “We have to be able to root it out at its source and just call a thing a thing.”

AS CITIES AND STATES DEVELOP THEIR pandemic response and recovery plans, advocacy groups are trying to make sure that they don't reinforce existing inequities. “When people are dying, we default to speed and efficiency, but efficiency and speed and doing what we used to do result in black and brown people getting left out,” said the Brookings Institution's Perry. That's what happened after Hurricane Katrina, according to Ashley Shelton, who previously worked on disaster recovery and now leads the Power Coalition, an alliance of more than 20 community groups in Louisiana. “A lot of people of color were disenfranchised” from federal aid after Katrina, she said, and so far, the federal response to the pandemic has followed a familiar pattern, with economic aid flowing to the customers of big banks and to larger businesses. In April the Power Coalition released a Roadmap for Recovery, with specific policy recommendations for racial and economic equity at the state and local levels. As a state commission determines how to spend \$1.8 billion in federal relief, Shelton and her coalition will be following the money and advocating for their policy priorities. She's facing a challenging political landscape in Louisiana. When we spoke, she was at the state capitol, where just a few days earlier, a bill to expand paid sick leave died in committee on a party-line vote.

Although much of the grassroots energy is at the state and local level, Shelton described the federal government as a necessary “engine” for recovery. Several other people emphasized this point, including Sharrelle Barber. “Marginalized folks, black folks, poor folks have always had to fight, even in the midst of a pandemic, to do what's necessary,” she said, referring to the mutual aid networks and other groups that have taken matters into their own hands. But “there's still so much need that needs to be addressed that can only be addressed by the power structures that actually created the inequity in the first place.”

When I asked Elder Mathews what her community in Detroit needed most, she put it simply: “I think what they needed was the truth—and a real plan.” ■



I do not think that we can go back to expecting people to fork over hours and hours a day sitting in traffic or trapped on a disease tube.

CARE WORK

Time for a Reset

Now everyone knows teachers, child care providers, and health aides are essential workers. Will that finally get them the pay and protections they deserve?

BRYCE COVERT

"Our heroes and heroines": From evening rounds of applause to chalk art, Americans are finding ways to express appreciation for essential workers.



CARMELLA SALINAS TRIED TO KEEP HER PRESCHOOL IN NEW MEXICO open for as long as she could. When the novel coronavirus started to spread through the United States, she began to take everyone's temperature each morning and required staff to wear masks. Parents told their children not to give hugs. But it became untenable. "We're constantly in contact with kids, their fluids," she said. Salinas has chronic asthma and was worried what would happen if she got the virus. She decided to close. "We want to do whatever we can for our community, but at the same time, we have to look out for ourselves, too. It really is a difficult, difficult choice to make to leave your classroom." She and her staff have been doing what they can to help the kids and their parents, offering them FaceTime sessions and filming YouTube videos of yoga or story time. One of her coworkers kept having to re-record hers because she kept crying.

It didn't get any easier when Salinas got an e-mail from the state encouraging providers like her to stay open. New Mexico deemed child care providers essential businesses, alongside health care providers and grocery stores. The silver lining, though, was the new honorific. "For us to finally be called essential workers...I've known it all along," she said. But now her governor knows it, too. And parents are realizing just how hard it is to do what she does now that they have to do it at home every day. "I think this is honestly going to change a lot of the way the nation sees us."

Care work—the in-person, direct services that keep people safe, healthy, and educated—has always been the underpinning of the rest of the economy. Child care allows parents to hold down jobs. Health care ensures that employees are healthy enough to go to work. Teachers nurture the next workforce. Elder care providers take care of our aging parents while we're on the clock. This has "always been important," said Paula England, a sociology professor at New York University. But the coronavirus crisis "really dramatizes the importance of the work." It's forcing us to reconsider how we value this work and the people who perform it. And workers are trying to turn that into lasting change.

CARE WORK, SAID PURDUE UNIVERSITY HISTORY professor Tithi Bhattacharya, is "life making and life sustaining." Yet it "receives the least amount of respect from capitalism." England, University of Massachusetts Amherst economist Nancy Folbre, and fellow UMass Amherst sociologist Michelle Budig have found that even when they compare workers with the same education and experience levels, those who are in care jobs are paid less than those in other lines of work. Experts say one reason for that pay penalty is that care work is closely associated with women. "It's seen as something that is part of what women are good at and what they naturally do," explained Ariane Hegewisch, the program director for employment and earnings at the Institute for Women's Policy Research. It's been undervalued both because it was historically done inside people's homes for free and also because it's seen as something women just want to do and don't need to be compensated for. "We kind of take it for granted, the same way we took for granted our mother's love," England said.



"For us to finally be called essential workers... this is going to change the way the nation sees us."

—Carmella Salinas,
child care provider

New lesson plans:

Educators, such as first-grade teacher Leanne Francis, have had to adapt to virtual instruction along with their students.

When performed outside the home, care work has often been done by black women. First, slaves cooked and cleaned in wealthy white households, and some provided child care. Later, domestic workers, who were overwhelmingly black, performed similar functions. Even today, people of color make up more than half of home health aides and about 40 percent of child care providers. The potent mix of the country's "patriarchy and white supremacy," as Melissa Boteach, the vice president for income security and child care at the National Women's Law Center, put it, meant care work was consistently sidelined as a labor issue. Domestic workers have long been excluded from protections that applied to most other workers.

When American women moved into paid work in droves during the 1960s and '70s—a significant share of black women had long been in the paid work force, but the percentage increased over that period, too—and tasks such as caring for children and the elderly became paid jobs, the country was swept up in culture wars over the roles of working women and motherhood. Instead of instituting a national universal child care system in the '70s, President Richard Nixon cast the idea as destructive to the family. The country recoiled from the idea that the government should play a role in providing and funding care that mothers were "supposed" to do, leaving a private, patchwork system that can't adequately compensate workers for the vital services they provide.

Some care workers have been folded into traditional employment relationships. Many nurses and teachers belong to unions and get benefits from their employers. Those employers—state governments, large hospital systems—have the resources to pay them more, even if they often devalue their employees. Others still operate outside the structures of traditional employment. But none of this work fits neatly into a capitalist system, which makes it difficult for workers to assert their bargaining power. "In a traditional market exchange, economists assume people are just self-interested," Folbre noted. "But care work almost always requires some level of concern." That means "you have women over a barrel," Hegewisch said. Going on strike is fraught, because it can leave students or patients without the services they need. Workers in this sector certainly go on strike, as nurses and teachers



have in recent years, but it often requires the buy-in and support of the people they serve to be successful. The wave of teacher strikes over the past few years worked, in part, because parents and students stood with their teachers.

Demanding better pay is also challenging because the benefits created by a job well-done don't always create profits. What's the monetary value of singing an engaging children's song or taking the time to speak to a patient? The people who benefit from care work are not just those who consume it but all of us. And yet the people who directly pay for care often can't afford to spend lots of money on it. The only way to adequately account for the collective benefit is to collectively pay for it.

SALINAS HAS BEEN WORKING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN for 18 years. It's a tough job even under normal circumstances. She makes \$20 an hour, and she knows that makes her lucky; child care workers make less than \$12 an hour at the median. "You really have to love what you do," she said. "You go home, and you don't ever stop thinking about the kids. You wake up in the night, think about...better ways to educate them, to make them empathetic little people."

Salinas doesn't have health insurance or retirement benefits, and she's become an activist to demand what she deserves. Every year she travels to her state capitol to lobby for more funding for child care providers and early childhood educators. "I'm telling senators and representatives we deserve to make more money because of all of the work we do," she said. "A lot of the time we get, 'OK, yeah, you're a babysitter.... You can't get paid that much.'"

"I feel awesome being called an essential worker," she added. Now when she goes back to the legislature to ask for more funding, she'll have something to point to. "Now there's proof," she said. And that is "creating a window for us," noted Wendoly Marte, the director of economic justice at Community Change Action.

Nearly all care workers—nurses, child care providers, home health aides, nursing home employees—have been deemed part of the essential workforce. Health care workers get the added privilege of a round of applause every night and thank-you signs hung in people's windows. Those things matter. "They're our heroes and heroines," Hegewisch said. With schools and day cares closed and nurses in short supply, people "are understanding that care work allows the rest of the economy to function," said Boteach. "Sometimes it's so invisible that you don't see it until it's gone."

In a recent poll conducted by Caring Across Generations, huge majorities said they placed a greater value on the work of nursing home attendants, home health aides, and child care providers since the coronavirus hit. "It's the denial of interdependence that's at the heart of the devaluation of care work," Folbre said. And the current crisis has made it painfully obvious just how interdependent we are.

"The Hallmark commercial [saying] let's thank a caregiver—that's insufficient. That's not going to change the power structure."

—David Broder, president, SEIU Virginia 512

Child care for some:

As American women entered the workforce in droves in the 1960s and '70s, an adequate child care system was never established.

BUT JUST BECAUSE WE'RE FINALLY CALLING CARE workers heroes doesn't mean we're willing to pay them more. "The Hallmark card TV commercial [saying] let's thank a caregiver—that's insufficient in this moment. That's not going to change the power structure," said David Broder, the president of SEIU Virginia 512, which represents home health aides. "The way we talk about them has changed, but what those in power are doing hasn't changed." Governors may acknowledge that, for example, child care is key to ensuring essential workers can go to work, but not all of them have offered more funding to help providers stay open. "This is a pregnant moment," agreed Jean Ross, a copresident of National Nurses United. But "it's not magic. It's not going to happen on its own."

Workers see the opportunity. There's been a surge of interest in organizing, unionizing, and even striking. Nursing home employees at 64 facilities across Illinois voted to strike in May to demand better pay and treatment. "We are just tired of being mistreated and disrespected and not being appreciated," said Laverne Johnson, a nursing home employee in the state. "If the strike is what we have to do to make a point to them, to let them know that we mean business, then that's what we're going to have to do." The strike was averted when management agreed to more protective gear and higher wages.

A year ago, said SEIU president Mary Kay Henry, the union ran a Facebook ad to organize workers in Denver and got about 100 responses. It just put out a similar ad and got six times the response. "I think the level of interest that working people have in joining together is at an all-time high," she said. Ross, Broder, and Marte have experienced similar things. Broder's union saw more growth in April than in any other month in its history. "There's a hunger to be really engaged and be part of the fight in this moment," Marte said.

The constituencies ready to fight for a revaluation of care work may have broadened. Finding quality child care, for example, is usually seen as parents' individual struggle. Now it's been laid bare that all parents deal with the same problem and are more or less affected the same way when it's not available. Reha Sterbin, a mother in New York City, has noticed a change in the conversations in her parenting groups: People are talking much more about how to be good employers for their nannies, not just how to get by paying as little as possible. "We're all suddenly home with our children all of the time; we are really missing having child care," she noted. "Those conversations are coming up a lot more than they used to."

Sterbin has employed nannies since her now kindergartner was a baby, and she joined Hand in Hand, a national network of people



who employ domestic workers, in 2017 to protest the Trump administration's family separation policy. But then the coronavirus hit. She realized that her nanny's financial stability depended entirely on Sterbin's good graces. "It's become increasingly clear that our society values the work that I do way more than it values the work that she does, [but] caring for my children is just as important a job, if not more," she said. "My anger at that is what's driving me." She's now speaking at webinars for fellow employers and is planning to call her elected officials to press for better protections.

With schools closed, the desperate need for care is hitting families with older children, too. Parents of babies and toddlers have little bandwidth to organize to demand better child care; now they may be joined by parents of older children. "It's a unique opening in the organizing space for people to [demand] that this whole system be rebuilt on a more solid foundation," Boteach said.

One way to improve conditions for at least some care workers would be to "bring more into the formal economy," Hegewisch said. Ai-jen Poo, executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, noted that house cleaners, nannies, and home care providers don't typically have paid sick days or other kinds of paid leave, so they were left with few protections when the pandemic hit. "Everyone who is working, playing a role in keeping us safe and...keeping the economy moving deserves a baseline," she said.

Meanwhile, home health aides and child care providers have been fighting to unionize. Henry wants to see sectoral bargaining, or the creation of statewide tables that bring all home care or child care employers together so workers can bargain with all of them at once. She noted that California Governor Gavin Newsom recently extended protections and benefits to all food chain workers, unionized or not. "We'd love to see that happen in the care sector," she said, "so we can make a permanent change to finally valuing this work once and for all."

CARE WORKERS HAVE ALREADY SECURED SOME TANGIBLE victories. The Minnesota legislature passed \$30 million in grants for child care providers at the end of March—the most Marte and other advocates have ever been able to secure for child care in the state. In Virginia, when Governor Ralph Northam froze all new spending in the state budget in reaction to the crisis, he protected a previously approved increase in pay rates for home care workers.

They're also thinking big. "This is the moment for us to call for bold solutions," Marte said. Her organization has called for \$100 billion in federal investment in child care—not just to help see it through the current crisis but also so that the sector is more stable well into the future. Broder's members recently lobbied successfully in favor of a bill that would gradually phase in a \$15 minimum hourly wage and benefit many of the low-paid home health aides he represents. While that figure used to feel "aspirational," he said, aspirations have changed. "If we're essential, then don't talk to me about \$15 in six years," he said. "Talk to me about \$20 today."

It's not clear if that kind of thinking has made its way



Among the most vulnerable: A nursing home resident in Paterson, N.J., is tested for Covid-19. Nursing homes have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, and workers have fought for protective gear and hazard pay.

into the halls of power. In its first round of stimulus to address the pandemic, Congress included just \$3.5 billion for child care. Some Democratic senators have called for a \$50 billion investment, but when the House passed another round of stimulus, it included just \$7 billion more in funding for a sector that needs \$9.6 billion a month merely to stay afloat during this crisis.

The pandemic has also led to increased solidarity among different kinds of care workers. The crisis is "making it visually very clear who else is in this situation," Broder said. Nurses are commuting to work on buses and subways alongside child care providers. Organizing together could be key to whether care workers can capitalize on this moment. "That should always have been happening," Poo said, but now her organization is working with the SEIU, teachers' unions, and other worker groups.

It may be the right time to press for large-scale change. "I would hope that what will happen is not just a revaluation of care workers but a reevaluation of the whole care delivery system," Folbre said. Single-payer health care would improve the health delivery system and could allow for better pay for providers. Universal child care would ensure parents can get the help they need while guaranteeing that providers earn decent wages.

The pandemic has made this change more urgent. But nothing is inevitable. The cratered economy is battering state budgets, making the prospect of more public spending appear dim. And yet the need is only going to increase. Parents need child care and schools in order to return to work and get the economy moving again. "There's definitely a window of opportunity. There's an opening," Marte said. "But we have to make sure that the organizing is happening." Bhattacharya sees the green shoots of mass movements in the ongoing wave of strikes that workers have staged during the crisis. "Just like the [1930s], it's going to take massive movements, social movements from below, to force governments to change direction," she said.

"There are always going to be people who very clearly want to take advantage" of care workers' passion to serve, Folbre said. "You got to fight for it." ■



"The level of interest that working people have in joining together is at an all-time high."

—Mary Kay Henry, president, SEIU



LABOR

More Perfect Unions

Five ways to rebuild the labor movement and transform America.

BILL FLETCHER JR.

ORGANIZED LABOR IS PARALYZED AT PRECISELY THE TIME WHEN COLLECTIVE action is needed most. Since the election of Donald Trump, most unions have done little more than protect their own jurisdictions, offering no guidance on what must be done during the pandemic.

Yet the spread of Covid-19 and its economic fallout have created an opening for labor to lead a mass movement. These events have shown how little remains of the social safety net the working class helped build nearly a century ago. Unions can now push the country toward a Third Reconstruction, an idea developed by several writers, most notably the historian Manning Marable. The term invokes both the Reconstruction era after the Civil War and the civil rights movement of the 1960s, a Second Reconstruction. While weaker than in the past, trade unions are still among the few groups with enough resources to advance a transformation that addresses not just racial injustice but also economic inequity, environmental catastrophe, and imperialism. Calling this effort a reconstruction is not overstating the case: Unless something dramatic is undertaken, the aftermath of Covid-19 will be economic and social collapse.

Bill Fletcher Jr. is the executive editor of Global African Worker, a past president of TransAfrica Forum, and a long-time trade unionist and writer.

To bring about a Third Reconstruction, there are five areas where labor needs to come together and fight.

First, unions need to unite to eradicate all forms of social Darwinism, the debunked 19th century view that the rich are rich because they are superior. The Trump administration and its minions are openly suggesting sacrificing hundreds of thousands of people—disproportionately from First Nations, Latinx, and black communities—to save capitalism. Texas's Republican Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, for instance, said seniors should be prepared to die in order to get the economy back in gear. To sustain communities and challenge social Darwinism, unions should build networks of support, such as mutual aid groups among members and their families and friends. By modeling an alternative vision to the barbaric world of social Darwinism, organized labor can help defeat this racist, classist scourge.

There is another concern: In the aftermath of the pandemic, there will be serious psychological and emotional injury brought on by the long period of isolation, anxiety, and fear. Unions and other people's organizations should anticipate widespread post-traumatic stress, and mutual aid may help to mitigate some of this long-term pain.

Second, labor must recognize that the crisis is not just about trade union members. There have been endless debates within organized labor over whether the movement should attempt to represent the entire working class or only dues-paying members. Those debates must end. Unions need to internalize the goals of what is known as bargaining for the common good, whereby they address issues facing the larger community. The Chicago Teachers Union modeled this during its 2012 strike, when the teachers made the needs of their students central to their demands. National Nurses United has been at the front lines from the beginning of this crisis—not only with its calls for personal protective equipment for medical personnel but also in highlighting the dangers of irresponsibly reopening the economy. The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union has been fighting to keep its members



in the meatpacking and retail industries safe and is also speaking out on behalf of the health of shoppers.

Unions should, of course, defend the health plans that they have, but they must also insist that everyone has a right to health care. This will have to be both a local and national struggle that necessitates building coalitions. And since at least 20 percent of the workforce is now jobless, the need for that health care to be free has become even more urgent.

Third, unions must lead a coalition that opposes austerity. For years, neoliberal economic policy has been strangling the public sector. If nothing else, this crisis demonstrates the result: People are left to fend for themselves. Congressional Republicans are refusing to provide additional assistance to the growing numbers of the unemployed, and in a move that would make even the most cynical among us blush, they are also seeking to destroy the US Postal Service. The USPS is a critical public good at all times, but it's especially vital during a pandemic. Wherever there is potential profit, the proponents of neoliberalism will appear like roaches scurrying around a kitchen at night. Unions must beat back the infestation and work to reenergize the public sector.

Fourth, unions must recognize the urgent need for massive worker organizing done on a strategic basis. The greatest growth of organized labor in US history occurred during the Great Depression. Provide workers with a strategy for victory, and they will organize and join unions—even under adverse conditions. While there are semi-spontaneous eruptions underway in workplaces across this country, including at Amazon and meatpacking facilities, remaking the US economy will require a dramatically different scale. It's a challenge that cannot be met by a handful of small organizations; it requires national unions. So why not launch a campaign to organize Walmart? How about an effort to organize the entire public sector in the South and the Southwest? In these cases, this would not be the work of only one or two unions. Rather, there needs to be national coordination that includes the work of so-called alt-labor, such as work-

Striking a match:

Members of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and of Local 1199 of the Retail Drug Employees Union picket Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City in 1959 (left). Striking Chicago public school teachers and their supporters march in Chicago in 2019 (right).



Provide workers with a strategy for victory, and they will organize and join unions even under adverse conditions.

er centers. To carry this out, much as in the 1930s, volunteers will need to enter workplaces to organize from the inside. Some of this is being done—as it was by leftists in the 1970s—but we must expand these efforts. There will surely be objections by some unions that the recession has reduced their war chests, but it is exactly in moments like these that workers need to be mobilized in creative ways.

Fifth, workers will be in a far better situation if unions support organizing the unemployed. As Michael Goldfield documents in his new and important work *The Southern Key*, organizing unemployed workers beginning in 1930 (led first and foremost by the Communist Party) was instrumental in building a labor renaissance. With at least 23 million people out of work, organizing the unemployed is more important than ever, and it must take various forms. Given the constraints imposed by Covid-19, social distancing will need to be factored in, but immediate relief, including food provision and eviction resistance, is crucial. Organized labor must also demand that the government provide longer-term assistance such as a guaranteed income. At the very least, unions should support the organizations already doing great work, like the Right to the City Alliance and Grassroots Global Justice.

This is a partial wish list, but for any of this to be realized, there needs to be a revolution within membership regarding its understanding of 21st century trade unionism. One of the assumptions that many leftists make is that what labor unions do (or do not do) is the result of good or poor leadership. While that is undoubtedly part of the equation, there also needs to be a critical mass of members who get that the old way of operating has failed and that a new approach is needed. The founder and first president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph, said, “The essence of trade unionism is social uplift.” That idea must be at the center of organizing. Labor cannot just defend its dwindling membership; it must fight for a Third Reconstruction and become a movement unafraid of exposing the myths and horrors of the so-called American experiment. ■

POLITICS

Democrats Must Dream Again

If they hope to transform America, Democrats must renew the hope for a bolder New Deal that FDR's vice president championed. But it's going to take a fight.

JOHN NICHOLS



Uncommon man:
Henry Wallace leaves
Birmingham, Ala., in
1948 after refusing to
address a segregated
audience.

THE SIMPLE FARMHOUSE WHERE HENRY Wallace was born and came of age can be found in Orient Township, on the southern side of Iowa's Adair County, just off what is referred to as a minimum maintenance road. Drivers are advised to travel it "at your own risk." That pretty well sums up the approach that has been taken with Wallace, Franklin Roosevelt's second vice president, over the 75 years since he battled for the soul of the Democratic Party at its 1944 convention, struggled to keep alive the promise of the New Deal, failed as an anti-Cold War presidential candidate in 1948, and retired to the political wilderness. On the December morning when I visited the farm, no one was there. I brushed the snow off a plaque mounted on a stone that read, "Henry A. Wallace. Birthplace 1888."

Wallace had hoped to live to the age of 100. If he had, I like to think he might have attended an Iowa caucus meeting on behalf of Jesse Jackson. In an effort to draw rural voters for his 1988 campaign, Jackson and his supporters set up their Rainbow Coalition headquarters in Adair County, just up the street from the county courthouse in Greenfield (population 1,713). But Wallace died at age 77, barely 20 years after he finished his vice presidency. The death of a former vice president who almost certainly would have succeeded to the presidency had he beaten the corporatists and the segregationists in 1944 was briefly noted. Wallace's old ideological nemesis, *The New York Times*, headlined his November 19, 1965, obituary "Ex-Vice President, Plant Expert." Wallace's end was not the big story that morning. Rather, it was a report on the burgeoning US military presence in Southeast Asia under another headline, "Casualties High." Wallace's funeral took place at an Episcopal chapel near his farm north of New York City. It featured no eulogy, no sermon, and no hymns. A reading from Psalm 46 was chosen ("He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the Earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder, he burneth the chariot of fire"), as was a reading from Psalm 121 ("He will not suffer thy foot to be moved").

The most prominent of the 300 attendees, John Gardner—who was then Lyndon Johnson's secretary of health, education, and welfare—had, like Wallace, started as a liberal Republican and become the conscience of a Democratic administration. He brought a wreath of red and white carnations from the White House and said he was honored to pay tribute to "an extraordinary American." Like Wallace in the mid-1930s, Gardner in the mid-'60s was a true believer in a presidency



"Freedom does not mean that you can't go to the doctor when you're sick. So we have to redefine what freedom means."

—Senator Bernie Sanders

Dream big: Wallace (left) and Franklin Roosevelt campaign in Hyde Park, N.Y., in 1940.

that sought to balance the scales a little more on the side of the common man and woman. ("To his admirers," the *Times* said in his obituary in 2002, "Mr. Gardner was a modern-day Plato, needed by Americans looking for optimism and idealism.") Unlike Wallace, however, Gardner would not finish his tenure with the administration in which he oversaw the launch of Medicare and championed its War on Poverty. A month before Johnson announced his decision to forgo a bid for reelection in 1968, Gardner quietly left the White House at a point when, the *Times* noted, "the war in Vietnam was increasingly occupying the president, and the nation's domestic problems were relegated to a lower priority, as reflected in budget cuts."

This was the long, sad story of the Democratic Party in the postwar years. It might see a New Frontier on the horizon or imagine a Great Society, but it never really got around the generals and the profiteers of the military-industrial complex. It might grasp at the promise of hope and change, but it was invariably derailed by the campaign donors and consultants who counseled that it would not do to invoke the hatred of Wall Street, as FDR once had, or to propose, as Wallace did, that instead of an American Century, what was really needed was "the century of the common man." And yet on that morning in 2018, as I wandered across the barnyard where a young Henry Wallace came to recognize the great possibility of the American experiment, I felt as if the Democratic Party that he had championed, the morally driven and future-oriented party he imagined in 1945, might yet come into being.

It had something to do with the politics that



emerged from the 2016 campaign of Bernie Sanders for the party's nomination. Like Wallace before him, Sanders ran up against a party establishment that was not inclined to go big. Yet the senator from Vermont's initial bid for the presidency planted seeds. And something was growing.

I MADE MY SECOND VISIT to Wallace's birthplace with Sanders on a rainy afternoon in the summer of 2019.

The two of us were in a room where the windows looked out on cornfields and wind turbines, an image, I suspect, Wallace would have adored. We paused to consider a photo of FDR and his vice president, beaming in delight with each other during a 1940 campaign appearance—the man Wallace described as “the greatest liberal in the history of the United States” and the vice president who sacrificed his power, career, and proper place in American history for the liberal vision that the Democratic Party had abandoned.

“You seem to have made it a mission of this campaign to renew the Economic Bill of Rights, to take this 75-year-old idea and bring it to the present,” I said. “Why?”

Sanders started answering with specifics, references to proposals for a Medicare for All, single-payer health care plan and tuition-free college. Then he stopped himself. “I want to start again,” he said. “The answer is that we have to rethink politics in America. We have to ask questions that the establishment does not want us to



Be idealistic:

Delegates at the 1944 Democratic National Convention rally for Wallace. However, he was replaced on the ticket by the more cautious Harry Truman.

Rise up: The Green New Deal would bring the boldness of the New Deal to bear on the climate crisis and the need to reshape our economy.



ask. What Roosevelt said back in 1944 is we have a Bill of Rights, which protects our political freedoms, and that's very important. But we have nothing to guarantee economic freedoms. So the question, in essence, that Roosevelt was asking is, if today you're making \$9 an hour, if today you have no health care, if today you can't afford a higher education, how free are you really? And that's the kind of discussion that we need. What does freedom mean?"

I asked Sanders how he would answer that question. “Freedom does not mean that you're

sleeping out on the streets,” he replied. “Freedom does not mean that you're \$100,000 in debt because you went to college. Freedom does not mean that you can't go to the doctor when you're sick. So we have to redefine what freedom means, and that's what fighting for an Economic Bill of Rights is about. All that we are saying—and this is not radical, some of it already exists in other countries around the world—is this: Health care is a human right. OK? Then the United States has got to join every other major country in guaranteeing that.

“If you work 40 hours a week and you can't make it on \$10 an hour, then we have to raise that minimum wage to at least \$15 an hour and make sure that workers can join a union. All over this country now, we have a massive housing crisis. It's not just half a million people sleeping out on the streets. It's people paying 50 to 55 percent of their limited incomes on housing. Freedom means that you have decent housing at a cost that you can afford. Freedom means that when you turn on your water faucet, the water that comes out is not toxic but drinkable.”

I looked up at a *Time* magazine cover from September 1940, a little less than a year before Sanders was born, with an iconic portrait, *Wallace of Iowa* by Grant Wood, the *American Gothic* painter, who was born a couple hundred miles away in Anamosa, Iowa. It was from a time when the media portrayed Wallace as a heroic figure. But the dynamic contender of one election year could be portrayed as the threat of the next and the radicalized dupe of the one after that. I reminded the senator that Wallace's advocacy for an Economic Bill of Rights that would apply to all Americans had run afoul of the segregationists in the Democratic Party. “They had segregationists leading the party!” Sanders interrupted.

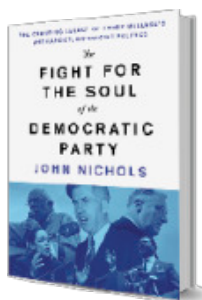
This excerpt is adapted from John Nichols's latest book, The Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party (Verso, 2020).

“What Roosevelt understood is that you have entrenched economic interests—he called them economic royalists, we call them the billionaire class—who will do anything that they can to protect their incredible wealth and their incredible power,” he continued. “So one of the points of this campaign is to ask the questions the corporate media will not ask, of course, and Congress does not discuss. Where is the power in America? Why aren’t things changing? How do you end up with three people owning more wealth than the bottom half of America? Those issues we don’t discuss. And I want to force discussions on those issues, because I’ve said it a million times and I’ll say it again: No president, not Bernie Sanders or anybody else, can do it alone. We can’t transform this economy, this government, unless millions of people are involved in an unprecedented grassroots political movement to challenge the power structure of this country.”

Sanders would learn over the ensuing months that the power structure gave no concessions to movements. As we spoke, I thought about the difference between the tepid politics Democrats have so frequently practiced and the transformational politics that are needed. If Democrats hope to be more than just an electoral machine, if they hope to transform our politics in ways that might finally address militarism and inequality, racism and the climate crisis, they have to think as Roosevelt and Wallace thought when they spoke of a New Deal and Four Freedoms and an Economic Bill of Rights. And they have to do so with an understanding that such bold responses are the best way to avert the threat of the American authoritarianism that the 33rd vice president began warning about three years before the 45th president was born.

SO WHY BE OPTIMISTIC? WHY NOT GIVE IN TO THE pessimism that has shaped so much of the post-war era? I found some of the answer in Orient but not all of it. Because while the story of Henry Wallace begins in those Iowa cornfields, it also passes through Detroit, where in the summer of 1943 he made the connection between the struggle against European fascism and “an Americanized fascism.” I visited Detroit in the summer of 2018, traveling with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as she campaigned for progressives in the state’s Democratic primaries. The days were hectic. So we agreed to meet at a café in a predominantly Arab American neighborhood in Dearborn a little bit before midnight. She had been going all day. She was tired, yet she still wanted to talk. When I asked her how she hoped to see the Democratic Party change, she blended the language of the past and the future, speaking of “a 21st century New Deal” and a new New Deal coalition.

“There is a hunger for an assertive, strong, ambitious, defined effort to establish and advance economic and social and racial justice for working-class Americans,” she told me. “That requires a plan. It requires ambitious ideas. People, I think, are searching for those champions, searching for that movement. I think [the way we do that is by] linking all of the individual movements that we see



“I don’t want that to be something that we just talk about but something that we are about. I want us to be that party again.”

—Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Choose a side: Ocasio-Cortez said Democrats must be “first and foremost accountable to working-class people again and to marginalized people.”

happening across the country and taking up those causes as our own. Taking up Ferguson as our own. Taking up Flint as our own. The Bronx as our own. Rikers as our own. Rural America as our own. I think that’s what it’s about, and that’s why it needs to be a movement.”

Could something like the New Deal be done again? Could it be done better? Could this talk of a 21st century Green New Deal move from a speaker’s platform to the program of government and then to the reality of a nation? Could the movement become the Democratic Party, and could that party transform America? Ocasio-Cortez recognized that the original New Deal had fallen short in too many ways. But she refused to believe that the spirit of the thing, the striving energy that FDR embraced at his best and that Wallace never surrendered, had died. If rural electrification was possible, then why not a Green New Deal? “I want us to be the party that wired and electrified—literally—the nation,” she said, as the weariness of the late hour dissipated. “Because it’s not over. We did that. And now we have a lot more to do.”

Democrats once dreamed the biggest dreams: of thwarting the politics of hatred and defeating the threat of American fascism, of achieving economic and social and racial justice and peace and prosperity. This is history. But it need not be history alone. Just blocks from where a Democratic vice president of the United States had thrown down the gauntlet and proposed a fight against racism and inequality that would finally extend the American dream to all Americans, here was a young Democratic leader who spoke of the New Deal as it should be spoken of—not as some majestic memory but as a touchstone. Beaming now, filled with energy and excitement, Ocasio-Cortez spoke of forging a party that would again extend from the bottom up, that would be “first and foremost accountable to working-class people again and to marginalized people.” She looked up, toward the North Star above the great American city of Detroit. “I don’t want that to be something that we just talk about but something that we *are* about,” she said. “I want us to be that party again.” ■





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INDIAN COUNTRY

A Postapocalyptic People

What it means to survive and dream.

JULIAN BRAVE NOISECAT



Dancing on the brink:
Stereoscope photos of
Crow Nation members
performing a Ghost
Dance circa 1890.



boy expressed it, I already knew that we are a postapocalyptic people. My dad is a recovering-alcoholic Indian artist, and parts of our family story would seem over-the-top in a Sherman Alexie novel. In our language, Secwepemcstín, the traditional way to say “good morning” is *tsecwínucw-k*, pronounced “chook-we-nook.” But it doesn’t mean “good morning.” It literally translates to “you survived the night.”

One time, after a night at the bar, my dad pulled a buck knife on the police in Red Lodge, Mont. The cops tased him, and the judge convicted him of a felony. About a decade later, when I was in college, I had to bail him and his long-haired Chihuahua named Angus out of a jail in Goldfield, Nev. He had been driving too fast in a vehicle that wasn’t registered in his name, leaving a trail of purple haze behind—and, well, he was also a large Native man. A few weeks ago, when the world was on lockdown, one of my cousins got shot in the chest in a drug-related altercation. He survived. When I heard about what happened, I called his mom. After we spoke, I sang one of our ancestors’ songs to myself—though not so loud that my white neighbors would hear. Then I prayed, then I cried. Who gets shot during a pandemic, anyway? Especially in Canada, where gun deaths totaled just 249 people in 2018. As Indians, I think we’ve been told that we’re supposed to be dead and gone so many times that we’ve internalized it. Some of us don’t want to be anymore. In a society built atop our graves, survival has become an act of resistance.

Through my own experience and reporting on post-apocalyptic Indigenous people like me, I’ve come to believe, like Cowboy, that those who know what it means to lose our world and live to tell the tale might have something to lend to a broader humanity that now faces its own existential crises in the form of disease and climate change. So when this latest apocalypse, the coronavirus, hit, I picked up my notebook and recorder and contacted a few wise friends and sources across Indian Country to check Cowboy’s hypothesis.

“We have soldiered through so much—all the terrible errors of the United States government that took our land.”

—Representative
Deb Haaland

AN INDIAN NAMED COWBOY ONCE TOLD A LECTURE hall full of Frenchmen that us Natives are a postapocalyptic people. Cowboy is a Blackfoot filmmaker from the Piikani and Kainai Nations near Calgary, in the Canadian province of Alberta. And like almost every Indian I’ve met, he is on a mission to reclaim things. He even changed his last name to Smithx—a rejection of Smith, the name missionaries imposed on his family, and an ode to Malcolm X. Cowboy and I were two Natives invited to a literary festival in Paris, where they put the Indians in the auditorium. Maybe we got the big room because the French are still entranced by the myth of the noble savage, but I think, even in a crowd that included luminaries like Colson Whitehead and Michael Chabon, the Indians really did have some of the most interesting and brilliant things to say.

Although I had never heard it articulated the way Cow-

Julian Brave NoiseCat is a fellow of the Type Media Center and the vice president of policy and strategy at Data for Progress.

ONE OF THE FIRST PEOPLE I CALLED WAS REPRESENTATIVE Deb Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo. Haaland, a Democrat, represents New Mexico’s First Congressional District and was one of the first two Native American women elected to Congress. She assumed office during the presidency of Donald Trump, who hung a portrait of slave owner and Indian killer Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office. That portrait was stationed behind the lectern when a group of elderly Navajo code talkers, war heroes whose language formed the basis of an unbreakable code that helped the United States win World War II, were honored at the White House. (At the event, Trump also called Democratic Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth



Representative Deb Haaland (D-N.M.) is a member of the Laguna Pueblo and one of the first two Native women elected to Congress.

Warren, who has claimed Native American ancestry, “Pocahontas.”) When the pandemic struck, the White House initially recommended zero dollars in federal aid to tribes. And when Congress passed a bill that included \$8 billion in relief for Indian Country, Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin did not disburse the funds for six weeks. By then, reservations like the Navajo Nation had more coronavirus cases per capita than Wuhan at the height of the outbreak in China.

This was the political system into which Haaland was elected and tasked with the dual responsibilities of representing her district and her race. Amid the pandemic, Haaland has been fighting to stop Washington lawmakers from ignoring and overruling tribes. I asked the congresswoman how she approaches such a weighty responsibility. She talked about her Pueblo ancestors, who migrated to the Southwest in the 1200s and planted fields of corn, beans, and squash in the desert. Haaland grew up around grandparents who lived without running water and electricity. When they needed water, they hauled it from the only spigot in the village. And when it got dark, they went to bed. “I’m grateful that tribes have somebody who they feel like they identify with,” she said. “We have been resilient, and we have soldiered through so much—all the terrible errors of the United States government that took our land and killed us with disease and starved us and kept moving us farther and farther from our homelands.” She added, “It’s time for us to make things right. And I intend to be in that fight until I can’t be in it any longer.”

Beyond Capitol Hill, Fawn Sharp, the president of the National Congress of American Indians and of the Quinault Indian Nation in Taholah, Wash., is already imagining what the Native fight for dignity and rights might look like after the pandemic. When I called her, it was a Friday evening. She was sitting on the reservation

“Under what circumstances would this administration actually do something to help tribal nations in the face of a pandemic?”

—Fawn Sharp

Faith Spotted Eagle is a Dakota activist who received an Electoral College vote in 2016.



beside Lake Quinault, looking out at the Olympic Mountains. Right at dusk, she said, the fish started to jump in the lake.

Sharp was at her wits’ end. “I’m at the point of thinking to myself, ‘Under what circumstances would this administration actually do something to help tribal nations in the face of a pandemic?’” she said. “Is this the time that tribal nations have to file a breach of trust case [for violation of treaty rights] against the United States?”

The Quinault are no strangers to that sort of fight. In the 1970s they joined other Pacific Northwest tribes in a campaign to get the US government to recognize their treaty rights over their ancestral waters. They purposefully got themselves arrested for fishing, a right guaranteed in their treaties. Sharp learned from the leaders of those fish-ins—Indian rights legends like Joe DeLaCruz of the Quinault and Billy Frank Jr. of the Nisqually—and has become an outspoken advocate for the environment. Rising seas have forced the Quinault to relocate hundreds of residents of the village of Taholah to higher ground. Her people’s staple food, the sockeye salmon, has almost entirely disappeared. In the 1950s and ’60s, hundreds of thousands of salmon swam up the Quinault River every year. Last year, there were barely 6,500, and the tribe had to close its salmon fishery. “We had to go through a genocide, and now our relatives in the natural world are also facing a genocide, and they have no voice,” Sharp said. “There is a long-standing leadership void around climate policy, and tribal nations are uniquely poised to rise.”

On the Yankton Reservation in South Dakota, Faith Spotted Eagle, a Dakota activist and *kumsi* (grandmother, pronounced “koo-she”), has some ideas about what it might look like for Native people to lead such a fight. The week before I called, Spotted Eagle put a few Dakota youths to work planting gardens on the reservation. The teenagers had to dodge barking dogs to plant the corn—a gift from the Mandan and Pawnee people to the Dakota hundreds of years ago—in the yards of homes still damaged by flooding from last year’s record rainfall. One of the girls had lupus, an autoimmune disease that can leave a person vulnerable to the sun, so Grandma Faith gave her a big goofy hat to protect her skin. And one of the young men was showing leadership potential, so Spotted Eagle had her son Kipp teach him how to drive the tractor. Under her watch, the young people tilled the ground and burned the weeds, replenishing the rich, black soil that lines the banks of the Missouri River. “Mother Earth forces us—it’s not even in a loving way, it’s more like in a tough love sort of

way—to appreciate what we can do for ourselves,” she said. “Mother Earth and her tough love.”

When the gardens were planted, she told the young farmers as well as the owners of these new cornfields to pray and to take care of what the earth might give them. They, like their ancestors, were now stewards of this land. Dakota were once denied their right to this soil because, according to the US government, they did not practice agriculture like “civilized” Europeans. Against this history, every stalk is a rebuttal.

This is serious stuff, but it’s not without comic relief. Spotted Eagle recalled that one Yankton resident couldn’t tell the difference between the weeds and the corn, so she just watered everything. “I figured they’d make it through it,” the woman explained to her. “They’d be tough plants.” A resilient garden for a resilient people.

ONE NIGHT, AFTER SPEAKING WITH HAALAND, Sharp, and Spotted Eagle, I thought back to a plan that Cowboy hatched to buy Castle Calgary in Scotland and rename it *mohkínstsis*, which means “elbow” in his language. It’s the original Blackfoot name for Calgary, Alberta. “Inverted colonization,” that’s how he put it. “Knock down the gates and invite in our brothers and sisters.”

Then I opened my laptop and scrolled through my Facebook news feed, where I keep in touch with family and friends back on the rez and across Indian Country. In the first weeks of the pandemic, I noticed Native people posting videos of themselves dancing and praying for a



“Mother Earth forces us—it’s not even in a loving way, it’s more like in a tough love sort of way—to appreciate what we can do for ourselves.”

—Faith Spotted Eagle

sick world. The last time Native life seemed on the brink of apocalypse, at the end of the 19th century, the Indians were also dancing. They called it the Ghost Dance. It foretold a world in which the colonists disappeared, the buffalo returned, and the land was restored to the people.

That spiritual movement ended on December 29, 1890, when the United States military gunned down hundreds of Lakota ghost dancers and buried their bodies in a mass grave. A week after the massacre, L. Frank Baum, who later wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, penned an editorial in the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*. “Our only safety depends upon the total extermination of the Indians,” he wrote. “Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.” Then his nation called us savages and made our people into mascots for their sports franchises. Maybe they were so haunted by us and what they did to take this land that they had to forget about their crimes—to put it out of their nation’s memories and history books.

As Native people, we have endured some of the darkest chapters in history and emerged knowing who we are, where we come from, and what we stand for. We’ve inherited a vision so audacious, it terrified our oppressors. It’s a worldview that celebrates beauty, defiance, and a playful wagging of the finger at the people who tried to kill us. After the pandemic but as the climate crisis unfolds, maybe more people will understand what it means to survive and still dream, like us. ■

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Letters

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Dark Recesses

It was a pleasure reading Elie Mystal's treatment of the Supreme Court justices in the current controversy over the court's procedures during this period of social distancing ["Lights, Camera, SCOTUS!" May 18/25]. He makes an excellent case for the Supreme Court to be treated just like any other political organization, which it most certainly is, despite the attempts of many in the pseudoprofession of law to create an aura of mystery and an existence separate from and above the rest of society. Mystal's article is timely and sheds much-needed light into the dark recesses of the practice of law. "Woe unto you, lawyers!" (Luke 11:52), for the public is catching on to the game.

THOMAS COMEAU
WOODLAND HILLS, CALIF.

The Road Already Taken

When I was a kid, my mother would leave us a note before going to work. We called these her "or else" notes—straighten your room before I get home, or else; vacuum the carpet before I get home, or else. In "Can Biden Go Left?" [May 4/11], D.D. Guttenplan writes that Joe Biden needs to disown his past concern with balanced budgets, needs to amend his relationship with

the Latinx community, and needs to show he understands that returning to the past in terms of our broken health care system is no longer an option. There was no need to ask my mother what "or else" meant, but what's the "or else" implied in Guttenplan's editorial? If it's a threat, do we really want to go down that road again?

BOB HANLEY
SAGINAW, MICH.

Submerging the Valley

Re "The Extinction Crisis Comes Home" [Jimmy Tobias, May 4/11], about the San Francisco Bay ecosystem: Beyond the region's fisheries, another tragedy begs mentioning. After the earthquake of 1906, the spectacular Hetch Hetchy Valley, which was created by the Tuolumne River and is part of Yosemite National Park, was dammed to create a reservoir for the city—a unique abuse of a national park and a catalyst for the environmental movement. The naturalist John Muir wrote of the devastation, "Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man."

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Books & the Arts



A SOUTHERN VANGUARD

The lost history of communism below the Mason-Dixon Line

by ROBERT GREENE II

“This is the firing line not simply for the emancipation of the American Negro but for the emancipation of the African Negro and the Negroes of the West Indies; for the emancipation of the colored races; and for the emancipation of the white slaves of modern capitalistic monopoly.” W.E.B. Du Bois delivered these lines before a large crowd in Columbia, S.C., in the

fall of 1946. The people gathered before him were neither strictly Marxist nor communist; they were mostly members of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which was founded in 1937 to organize young people, workers, and other disaffected groups across the South. But no one in that audience was shocked by what he had to say. For them, like Du Bois, breaking the back of Southern white supremacy required challenging and remaking the larger system of exploitative capitalism that had subjected black and white Southerners to centuries of injustice. With the Congress of

Industrial Organizations executing its Operation Dixie to organize industrial workers in the South that year and with African American veterans back from the war embarking on their own militant and heroic struggle for human rights there, Du Bois’s insistence that the South had become the center of a new battle for freedom was in no way far from the truth.

Part of the reason for this was that the struggle for civil rights and racial equality in the South had long been linked to activity in the economic sphere, where millions of white and

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black Southerners worked as sharecroppers and factory employees and in various low-wage jobs. During the Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called the region the “nation’s No. 1 economic problem,” and there had always been an undercurrent of Southern-based radicalism that sought wide-ranging change—not only civil and political rights but also economic and social ones.

To add to this, beginning in the 1930s, many of the leaders and organizers in the struggle against segregation and Jim Crow were members of the Communist Party or its fellow travelers. From Harlem in New York City to Birmingham, Ala., black and white Communists organized across racial and class lines throughout the Great Depression and World War II to fight fascism abroad and hunger and racism at home. By the time the Southern Negro Youth Congress was organized, many involved in the burgeoning civil rights movement had been active in earlier Communist and Communist-affiliated groups. Others who were radicalized by the trial of the Scottsboro Boys and the Angelo Herndon case were exposed to many radical economic ideas and felt a particular loyalty to the left, having witnessed in both trials the Communist Party backing lawyers to take up the cause of black civil and legal rights in the South.

So when Du Bois spoke before a crowd of young black activists in the mid-1940s, he was preaching to the choir, because an ever-growing number of radical Southerners already agreed with him that the struggle against white supremacy was a struggle against capitalism, too. As Du Bois told them, the “first and greatest...allies are the white working classes about you,” which had also been exploited by wealthy capitalists interested in dividing the South’s working class.

Mary Stanton’s new book, *Red, Black, White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930–1950*, helps recover this history through the story of one of the party’s most important sections: District 17, a regional unit of the national party that was headquartered in industrial Birmingham and sought to coordinate efforts to organize white and black Southerners in Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia. During the Depression, World War II, and the

Red, Black, White

The Alabama Communist Party, 1930–1950

By Mary Stanton

University of Georgia Press. 248 pp.

\$29.95

early postwar years, the group was at the forefront of the struggle throughout the Deep South against police brutality, lynchings, and anti-free-speech laws. In terms of the number of members, it often punched above its weight: James S. Allen, a Communist organizer who wrote the memoir *Organizing in the Depression South*, estimated that in 1931 the party had fewer than 500 members in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia. By chronicling the party’s successful efforts to establish a foothold in Alabama during the 1930s and ’40s, Stanton shows us that Communist organizers adopted a variety of organizing tools and resources—including

the International Labor Defense (ILD), the American section of the Comintern’s legal arm—in order to win black Americans their rights and freedom in court. Highlighting how these black and white Communists built a multiracial movement through a series of highly publicized trials, Stanton illuminates how Communists in Alabama and elsewhere in the United States used the law not only to bring international attention to the worst of Jim Crow segregation but also to build solidarity across race and class lines. By doing the hard work of pursuing a legal strategy closely tied to a media strategy of publicizing numerous social injustices, Alabama Communists helped lay the foundation for the organized civil rights movement that emerged in the late 1940s and early ’50s.

Based primarily in Northern cities, the Communist Party started to plan its organizing campaign in the South in the early 1930s, a new view of the South as a key area of activism that Harry Haywood, a prominent black Communist based in Chicago, promulgated in *The Communist* in his 1933 essay “The Struggle for the Leninist Position on the Negro Question in the United States.” His 1948 book *Negro Liberation* insisted, among other things, that American radicals need to turn their attention to the fight for

black political and economic rights in the so-called Black Belt, the fertile land sweeping south from Virginia through the heart of the former Confederacy to Louisiana. There “a nation within a nation” stood, and Communists, Haywood argued, could join in its struggle for self-determination—and by doing so build a base for revolution.

Haywood’s arguments made a profound impression on his fellow Communists, both black and white, in the North. He first came across this idea while living in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and seeing the autonomous republics within the USSR, which provided a model for what he desired for African Americans in the South. The Depression only sharpened this insight. Hoping to expand the party’s membership and reach in the rest of the United States, Haywood saw an opportunity to do just that by organizing the South.

However, as the Communist organizers arrived in different Southern cities, they found that they had to make changes on the fly to the idea Haywood promoted. As Stanton tells us, many of the black sharecroppers, miners, and industrial workers they encountered did not want to opt out of the system but rather to opt into it: They wanted “to participate in the nation’s prosperity, to claim constitutional guarantees, and to assume a rightful place in society.” This discovery left a profound mark on early Communist organizers and shaped much of the work they did in the South and in the North as well. Instead of focusing on an all-out revolution against Jim Crow’s entrenched segregation, they sought to help black Americans win their economic, political, and legal rights. Rather than a violent overthrow of the system, they mostly attempted to use various means of protest to win major victories on behalf of social and political reform.

Nationally, the Communists accepted this Popular Front approach, seeking to pursue social justice in all of its manifestations, and the experience of the Alabama Communists played an important role in shaping this evolution in American Communist thinking and in helping the party, as its vanguard, test the applications of this new approach. The Alabama Communist Party, after all, made up a considerable part of District 17. The threats these activists and their allies faced were stark. Even at the height of its popularity during the Great Depression, it was risky being a member of the Communist Party anywhere in the country, and organizing for civil rights and economic reform in Alabama was an



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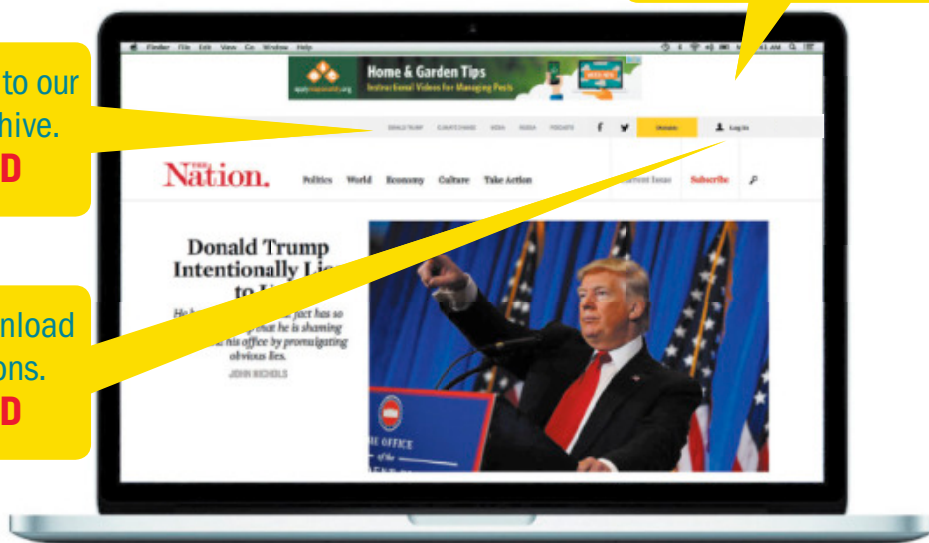
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even more dangerous prospect. District 17 became ground zero for the new reformism that ran through the party. Communists there could become active in both civil rights and labor organizing; they could reach out to black and white Southerners alike, form trade unions, and provide them with legal defense. As a result, they were a constant target of harassment and beatings, so much so that Stanton compares District 17 to “a firehouse—in a perennial state of emergency, running on adrenalin.”

S Stanton begins *Red, Black, White* with the infamous Scottsboro Boys trial. In 1931, nine young African American men were accused by two white women of raping them while they rode on a train traveling through Tennessee and Alabama. The NAACP was initially reluctant to take the case, so the ILD rushed to the Scottsboro Boys' defense. The case soon rocketed to international prominence, primarily because of the unrelenting efforts of local Communist activists and the ILD's skillful use of publicity. Eventually, the state gave posthumous pardons to several of the young men—Ozie Powell, Haywood Patterson, Charlie Weems, Andy Wright.

The achievements of the ILD helped the Communist Party build some support among African Americans across the country, and Stanton traces how Communist organizers in Birmingham and the rest of District 17 used it to fuel activist campaigns throughout the Deep South. Even with the ILD's organizing, however, the Birmingham organizers struggled to craft a party structure that was able to withstand the heat of the anti-communism and anti-black racism that pervaded Alabama's political system in the 1930s and '40s. The party organization that had been developed in the North proved important in supporting the party's efforts in the South. Faced with laws explicitly designed to crack down on radical organizing, the national party sent lawyers to defend the organizers and helped publicize their cases. But District 17 often found that it had to innovate its own tactics: investigating the lynchings and other murders of African Americans in the state, organizing local sharecropper unions and a reading group, and enlisting sympathetic local lawyers.

Stanton also discusses District 17's attempts to investigate police brutality in cities like Memphis in the 1930s. The hostility that the Communist organizers faced was attributable to their radical stance on

racial equality as well as to their attempts to organize Southern workers. They were operating in a one-party system that constantly monitored and suppressed all forms of radical organizing, and the ghosts of the past haunted their work. In 1919 in Elaine, Ark., radicals were victims of the Red Summer racial pogrom sparked by attempts to organize black sharecroppers.

The struggles of union workers in Gastonia, N.C., in 1929 and the collapse of the textile workers' strike in 1934 likewise showed how hostile Southern authorities were to any labor organizing, and many Communists there were forced to try a variety of tactics untested in the North. Often stretched thin trying to help out wherever they could, they ended up having to live in a state of what Stanton calls “mind-numbing fear,” but they nonetheless persevered and helped thousands in the American South make their desires for freedom known across the world.

While offering us a close view of local organizing, Stanton never loses sight of the larger story of American communism. She also situates District 17's activism within a larger history of radical activism and protest in the Deep South that helped plant the seeds for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. The members of District 17 and the people they served recognized that theirs was but a local phase of a much broader worldwide struggle against not just fascism but all forms of imperialist and racist domination. Du Bois was not alone in making the connections between local struggles against Jim Crow and international struggles against capitalism. Black Southerners defended Ethiopia after it was invaded by Italy in 1935 and journeyed to Spain to fight Franco's forces in the Spanish Civil War. They all saw their fight as the same one, against the same enemy, on multiple fronts.

As Stanton shows near the end of the book, the forces of reaction in the South were aware of this larger struggle, too, even as their attempts to crush the Communists and drive back interracial organizing became more successful in the postwar years, when Northerners and Southerners alike targeted labor and socialist organizers

across the country, essentially forcing the left underground. The Second Red Scare of the 1940s and '50s dealt some severe blows, but the Communist Party left a legacy of grassroots organizing and agitation that would become part of the broader civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

Other books have covered at least a portion of this terrain before. Robin D.G. Kelley's landmark *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* is the best-known work on the party's operations in Alabama in this period. Glenda Gilmore's

Defying Dixie, John Egerton's

Speak Now Against the Day, and Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope* also note that the fight against Jim Crow did not begin with the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Taken together, these books tell a rich story that is often neglected or minimized in the mainstream narratives of Southern history. By excavating the roots of civil rights activism in the South that reach back to the 1930s, they remind us that the struggle for political and civil rights there was almost always twinned with the struggle for economic and social rights.

The role that Communists played in the civil rights movement of the postwar years is often suppressed or glossed over, if mentioned at all. *Red, Black, White* prompts us to remember a different Southern past, and Stanton shows us the more practical and down-to-earth nature of Communist organizing in the South as well. The party's activists arrived in the region with an ideological view of class struggle but adapted their tactics and strategy after listening to people on the ground. “Pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the will” is the memorable phrase coined by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, but it could just as easily have been uttered by Alabama's Communists, both those from the South and those who traveled there to help organize it. These Communists risked nearly everything, and they did so knowing full well that their ideals might never be realized in their lifetimes. But they nonetheless persisted. Whether trying to save someone from lynching or struggling to organize workers in a Birmingham steel plant, it was, for nearly all of them, a matter of life or death. ■





THE LOTTERY

The two faces of birthright citizenship

by NATHAN PERL-ROSENTHAL

Birthright citizenship is the foundation of American democracy. The birthright principle, rooted in common law and the Reconstruction era's 14th Amendment, guarantees citizenship to the children of US citizens and to everyone born within the country's borders. The grant of citizenship at birth has a powerful egalitarian effect, making every American—at least in theory—an equal stakeholder in the political community. Yet it brings about this desirable result through what can only

be described as arbitrary means. One inherits citizenship from one's parents or acquires it based on the happenstance of one's place of birth. Our democracy of equal-born citizens is therefore built on a fundamental inequality: the unearned privilege of winning what the scholar Ayelet Shachar has called "the birthright lottery."

Two recent histories explain how the illiberal birthright principle has become so fundamental to modern democracies. In *Race Is About Politics*, the French historian Jean-Frédéric Schaub offers an elegant and polemical account of how the idea of racial difference, first crafted in medieval Spain, grew into a defining form of political other-

ness. *Birthright Citizens*, the most recent book by the prominent historian of law and race Martha S. Jones, gives us a closer look at how this process unfolded in the United States. Taking us through the streets and into the courthouses of 19th century Baltimore, Jones shows us how free African Americans asserted their citizenship as a birthright in order to counter the hereditary logic of race and, in so doing, helped lay the groundwork for the 14th Amendment's guarantee of citizenship to all those born on US soil.

Taken together, *Race Is About Politics* and *Birthright Citizens* show the power as well as the limits of birthright politics—how it can

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be a vehicle for liberation and equality and how it can serve the cause of racial and ethnic exclusion. Both books acknowledge the potential of birthright politics to generate inclusive and equal citizenship. They also show that beneath its surface, currents of inequality persist that can make it a treacherous medium for creating a more just society.

Birthright has been part of political life at least since Jacob bought the blessings of the firstborn from his brother, Esau. From the ancient world through the early modern era, birth determined one's station in life. Born a king or a nobleman, one had rights and duties that a commoner would never have. One's place of birth mattered, too: The native sons of a city had privileges denied to the peasants born a stone's throw outside its walls. However, in practice, the premodern world was more socially and politically dynamic than the theory might suggest. Commoners could become noblemen—kings, even—and nobles could fall into a penury little different from that of the peasantry. But the principle of birthright remained the rule. A natural-born subject, wrote the English jurist William Blackstone in 1765, owed a “perpetual” allegiance to his sovereign from the moment of his birth, one that could never be “forfeited, cancelled, or altered.”

Starting in the mid-15th century, birthright politics took on a new form: the notion of race. As Schaub observes early in his book, the history of race is often flattened into a timeless and universal practice of differentiation based on how people look. But the idea of race, he insists, began as something else. It was not about appearance at all; in fact, early racial thought differentiated among groups that looked alike. Race was an ideology that sought to draw boundaries of political community through genealogy and birthright. By “naturaliz[ing]” forms of “sociopolitical difference,” it applied a new and pernicious patina to the age-old practice of inherited political status.

To make his argument, Schaub retells the story of the racialization of Jews in the Iberian Peninsula—which he sees as a key passage in the development of both racial thought and modern birthright politics. Starting in the eighth century, most of Iberia fell under the rule of a succession of Muslim states, which were content to

Race Is About Politics

Lessons From History

By Jean-Frédéric Schaub

Translated by Lara Vergnaud

Princeton University Press. 224 pp. \$29.95

Birthright Citizens

A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America

By Martha S. Jones

Cambridge University Press. 268 pp.

\$27.99

let the region's large Jewish population exist in relative peace and autonomy. But as Christian kingdoms gradually conquered the peninsula during the Middle Ages, they and the Catholic Church sought to enforce religious conformity on their newly acquired lands. Jews were massacred or subjected to mass forced conversions. In 1492 the “Catholic Monarchs” Ferdinand and Isabella of Aragon and Castile completed the conquest and brought this process to its conclusion, forcing all of the remaining Jews to convert to Catholicism or leave.

Yet even as they were stamping out the last pockets of Judaism in Iberia, Spain's Old Christians, jealous of the social and political power they might lose to the new converts, were finding ways to perpetuate their outsider status. By

the 1440s, Old Christians had formalized in law an early form of racial ideology that rested on a distinction between two kinds of otherness: Jewish belief and Jewishness. The Jewish faith could be washed away at the baptismal font.

But Jewishness was something else altogether—a form of genealogical inferiority embedded in Jewish bodies. It passed from one generation to the next, and it was unalterable. Jews were a different people as well as a different faith. Although they could convert, they would retain their racial otherness (which was also invisible, since the *conversos* looked just like the Old Christians).

In the decades after their first contact with the Americas in 1492, Iberians and other Europeans carried this emerging racial ideology around the globe, creating an expansive portfolio of racializing theories to mark off many other groups as permanent outsiders. They increasingly imagined Native Americans and sub-Saharan Africans as distinct races, granting themselves license to take their lands and reduce

their people to serfdom or slavery. Unlike the *conversos*, many of these populations had physical features, especially skin color, that created visible forms of distinction between them and Europeans. Though Europeans used these features to identify the members of the various “races,” their fundamental difference, they insisted, was genealogical—an inheritance from birth, as with the Jews of Iberia.

The racialization of non-Europeans in the Americas and Africa thus became an essential part of European efforts to draw lines of political exclusion within and around their empires, putting millions of people outside the circle of citizenship and, in some cases, outside the circle of humanity itself. Unlike other forms of identity and political membership, this birthright politics enfolded many Europeans, including women and even members of other religious groups, as natural-born members of a racial community. But it excluded many others and insisted that belonging was an immutable fact, lodging racial otherness in the body and making the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups permanent and unalterable.

This racialized logic of birthright, as Schaub observes, has remained latent in Western politics ever since, wielded by dominant groups over and over again as a way to slow down or stop the social and political ascent of subordinated communities.

When the United States emerged as an independent nation, it seemed to promise at least a partial break from the idea that political belonging should be the result of birth alone. Starting with their 1776 decision to disavow the British monarch, American revolutionaries insisted that theirs was a community of citizens who freely chose to be part of the nation. Their actions in subsequent decades gave some substance to those claims. The 1790 Naturalization Act, the new nation's first immigration law, let any free white person enter the country and become an American citizen more or less at will. Some US politicians even seemed inclined to accept the claim that citizens could expatriate themselves—that is, give up their citizenship. In 1795, Supreme Court Justice James Iredell even ruminated about whether expatriation was a “natural, inalienable right” that could not be limited or regulated by the state.

Yet status by birth entrenched itself in the politics of the new republic as well. A few exceptions aside, the nation's founders



embraced a birthright notion of race not unlike that of the Spanish—which they then used to justify slavery and the denial of rights and citizenship to nonwhite people living in US territories. At the time of the American Revolution, roughly one out of every six inhabitants of the American colonies was an enslaved African. White Americans justified their status on the grounds that Africans were members of a different and inferior race, whose stain passed from generation to generation.

Members of the founding generation, eager to expand the white population of their new country, took an equally expansive view of the birthright principle's application to members of their racial group. David Ramsay, a South Carolina congressman and early theorist of US citizenship, believed that American citizens "transmitted" their citizenship to their children "by inheritance." Before long, judges and legislators had extended this potent principle of hereditary citizenship to include any white person born to US citizens abroad and to white people born to noncitizens on American soil.

In *Birthright Citizens*, Jones explores how a small but significant free African American community tried to turn the young republic's birthright politics on its head, transforming a doctrine of exclusion and hierarchy into a means by which they could claim a place for themselves in American society. Free African Americans, like many people of color in the Atlantic world, were relentlessly pursued by the possibility that their race, not their status as free people, was their true birthright. The risks of exclusion or expulsion and the nightmare of reenslavement were a constant presence in their lives. Claiming American citizenship as an inalienable birthright was a crucial way for free African Americans to overcome these dangers—and, Jones argues, their claims had a lasting impact on the nature of citizenship for all Americans.

Baltimore was a center of these efforts by free African Americans to assert their inborn right to US citizenship, and Jones focuses her narrative on their story. As members of an old and relatively wealthy community, Baltimore's African Americans were well equipped to use the city's courts as a forum for demonstrating their citizenship by exercising the rights of free people. They sued fellow Baltimoreans of both races over matters great and small, from a debt of a few tens of dollars to control of a prosperous Methodist church and its property. These suits protected their property, but they also

had symbolic value: Even an unsuccessful suit affirmed a litigant's status as a legal person. While in court, black litigants could, as Jones put it, become "peers to their white counterparts." And the act of going to court, repeated year in and year out, could be used to make claims, however tenuous, about citizenship and equality.

But exercising one's rights in court proved to be a weak guarantor of African American citizenship. Throughout the antebellum period, in Baltimore and elsewhere, white legislators and jurists worked to reduce African Americans to the status of "denizens," a category in English common law for individuals who were designated neither native nor foreign and occupied a middle ground between full membership and full exclusion. In Maryland alone, the state legislature heaped on law after law that sought to impose this second-class status on black people in the state. African Americans could not freely or easily leave the state, they could not vote, and they faced restrictions on owning firearms (though in practice, white judges in Baltimore routinely granted gun licenses to black men). African American citizenship, in short, was perpetually under assault.

Starting in the 1820s, Baltimore's African Americans found their citizenship status threatened in a new and frightening way by the so-called colonization movement. Colonization was a project, led by white Americans, that sought to empty the country of free people of color. Most proponents of colonization did not envision forcibly expelling free people of color but wanted them to leave of their own volition. Yet even if it was not backed by a threat of force, colonization posed an existential threat to African American citizenship: All such projects rested on the assumption that the true home of African Americans was somewhere else. When coupled with measures designed to make life in the United States difficult for free people of color, as it often was, colonization took on the sinister, coercive overtones of ethnic cleansing.

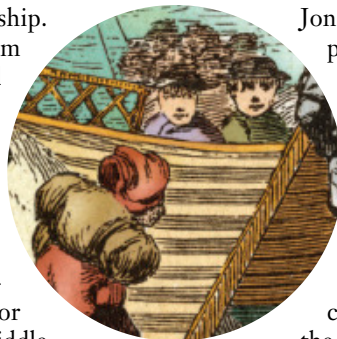
To counter the threat of colonization and other efforts to reduce them to the status of denizens, black Baltimoreans and their allies began to declare their citizenship an inalienable birthright. "We are Americans, having a birthright citizenship," wrote the Pennsylvanian African American leader Martin

Delany in 1852, and activists in Baltimore transformed this claim into their political creed. Inalienable citizenship was defined by the same birthbound language that was used to exclude them. In 1831, Baltimore's leading black citizens issued a declaration proclaiming themselves natives of the "land in which we were born" and insisting that it was thus their "true and appropriate home."

William Yates, a white activist whom Jones discusses at length, expanded on this notion in an 1838 treatise. Free people of color, he argued, were undoubtedly citizens because they were "natives of the country."

These claims by black Baltimoreans began to resound forcefully beyond the city's borders in the run-up to the Civil War. The most striking illustration of their reach, curiously enough, came from the pen of a famous opponent of black citizenship, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Roger B. Taney. As a son of the city and a leading Maryland politician before joining the court, he was intimately familiar with the black Baltimoreans and their claims to US citizenship. Both were clearly on his mind in 1857 when he authored the court's notorious opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, an appeal of a freedom suit brought by an enslaved man from the Midwest. Going well beyond what was necessary to resolve the case presented to the court, Taney decided to use it as an opportunity to pronounce against African Americans' aspirations to citizenship in general. His opinion provided a decisive rebuff to black Baltimoreans' claims. African Americans, he baldly declared, were "not citizens." The "unhappy black race," he continued (in language that closely echoed the Iberians' more than four centuries earlier), "were separated from the white by indelible marks."

Jones's book closes with a brief discussion of Reconstruction, which gives a tantalizing glimpse of the connections between African American claims to birthright citizenship in the antebellum period and the arguments about it after the Civil War that culminated in the 14th Amendment. The aftermath of the war saw a final struggle, played out across the country, to remove the persistent doubts about the citizenship status of former enslaved people and freeborn African Americans alike. The 14th Amendment, adopted in 1868, aimed to remove all ambiguity on this point by constitutionalizing the very principle of birthright citizenship



that activists for African American rights had been hammering home for decades. “All persons born...in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof,” the amendment states, “are citizens of the United States.” By the time this language was adopted, black Baltimoreans were no longer prophets in the wilderness: The idea of citizenship for African Americans had gained substantial acceptance in the North. But they were surely gratified to find their argument set, at long last, into the US Constitution.

In the century and a half since its ratification, the citizenship clause of the 14th Amendment has been without doubt a force for good, a powerful instrument for unambiguously confirming membership in the American nation. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the face of virulent anti-Chinese racism, the clause guaranteed the citizenship of individuals born to Chinese parents on US soil. It did likewise for the children of Eastern and Southern European immigrants who came to the United States in the early 20th century, and in more

recent times, it has extended citizenship to the American-born children of undocumented immigrants from Latin America and other regions.

Yet as Schaub’s historical genealogy of racial thought reminds us, there is a flip side to this coin. Like the idea of race to which it is sometimes opposed, the birthright principle works through inheritance, passing status from parent to child as if it were an innate quality in a bloodline. It can also confer the same status based on the accident of where one is born. In either case, the birthright principle distributes citizenship’s privileges and blessings by chance rather than in accordance with any higher principle of justice. In practice, this means equality for some is bought at the price of arbitrary exclusion for many.

For much of the recent past, Americans have uncritically accepted the bargain we have struck between these two faces of the birthright principle. The benefits of inclusion have seemed to far outweigh its exclusionary, illiberal mechanism for deciding who is in and who is out. But in our age of global inequality, it is clear the arbitrary belonging created by birthright politics is no longer adequate to our moment. Globally, the distribution of wealth among the world’s countries has reached unprecedented levels of inequality and continues to grow more extreme. The negative externalities of runaway consumption, above all climate change and its effects, are falling hardest on the countries and peoples least able to bear the burden. Infectious diseases—of which the novel coronavirus is just the latest arrival—kill millions of people in poorer countries as the citizens of the richest nations shut their gates and hoard medicine and supplies. How is it even remotely fair to allocate citizenship in the world’s nations by mere random chance when so much depends on which ticket one draws?

Rethinking the politics of birthright will not be easy. The roots of birthright belonging extend deep into the soil of the American political tradition. And as Schaub and Jones remind us, over the past two centuries we have gained a great deal, in terms of equality and inclusion, from the audacious grafting of democratic institutions onto a political community defined by birthright. But as the modern world of nation-states enters its third century and perhaps comes to its crisis, we will have to take a hard look at the birthright principle and decide if it is still right—if, indeed, we can still accept it. Should birth alone dictate so much about who we are? ■

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Yes, of course: in the end, we found the guilty ones, aliens over-running the route.

We were not alone: we had to be tough.

It’s true: we were outnumbered. But for quality we hold the record. Which is why we will never lose first place when it comes to terror.

It’s good to appear peaceful. As justification for the paragon of modern crime.

There’s no trace of the past, no more “live up to our motto.”

Let the misinformed old guys have their rest and the new generation go out on attack!

Although it’s true, absolutely true, that since time immemorial those laws gave us total power and this star has never lost its cushion of sky and purity and the Western, Christian breath of our guardian angels, who got bloodied each time it was in our interest.

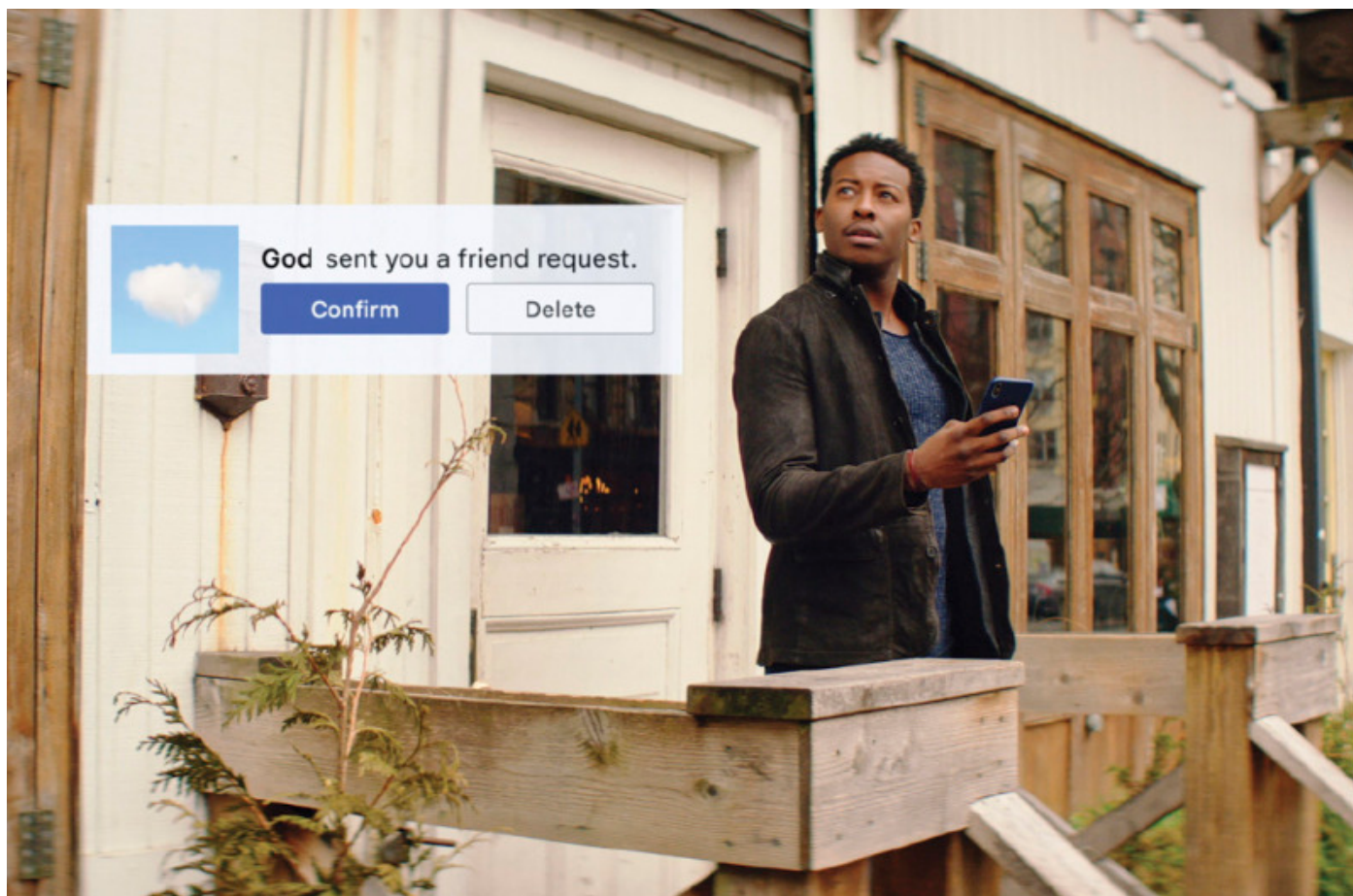
Which is why we’re still in first place when it comes to being free and up-to-date.

And we can never go back or repent or show our face because we follow orders and keep secrets.

Yes, there is something visible in the invisible.

ENNIO MOLTEDO

Translated from the Spanish by Marguerite Feitlowitz



COMMON TRAUMAS

The peculiar morality plays of *God Friended Me*

by ERIN SCHWARTZ

In his commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote that "man cannot know God, for he is ever the unknown God." CBS's television series *God Friended Me* would disagree. Watch a handful of episodes of the comedy-drama, and you can sketch God's personality in broad strokes: God likes Fibonacci, the song "That's Amore," AI-generated art, mixed martial arts, cops, causing drama at family gatherings, and *The Maltese Falcon*. If you have a secret child (as many characters in the show do), God thinks that you absolutely should seek him or her out for a reconciliation, no matter the circumstances. God is all right

with monarchy (as long as rulers advocate for incremental, progressive change) and thinks it's an acceptable payoff to hack into personal medical records if the aim is to prevent a divorce. God is not quite ready to support legalizing recreational marijuana and thinks you shouldn't run from a bench warrant. God hates it when teens run scams on Facebook.

God Friended Me follows the path of podcaster Miles finer (Brandon Micheal Hall). He's the millennial atheist son of a family of Episcopalians, and his podcast is devoted to his religious skepticism. But one day he receives a mysterious friend request from a Facebook account calling itself God. Miles begins receiving strangers' profiles from the account as friend suggestions, which he disregards as a hoax until he encounters the people in public, usually finding them in some

state of extreme distress. Over the course of the first season, Miles gradually accepts his role as the God account's prophet. He enlists the help of his friends Cara (Violett Beane) and Rakesh (Suraj Sharma) to follow its social media bread crumbs and intervene in the lives of people who need help. Soon Miles scraps the God-is-dead discussion on his podcast and instead tells inspirational stories about the account's good deeds.

The God account's interventions during the recent second (and, as it happens, final) season include getting a veteran back together with his girlfriend, raising money via GoFundMe for a child's kidney transplant not covered by health insurance, persuading a precocious teen not to hack into classified Department of Defense files, and ensuring that the vaguely feminist princess of a made-up Central African nation named Longo

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will ascend to the throne instead of her scheming, conservative brother. (The God account also, controversially, nabs Cara's stepfather for insider trading.) Each episode functions as a brief morality play for a peculiar moral worldview. It's not quite Christian, although most of the show's religious characters are Christians. The God of *God Friended Me* is not recognizable from any of the world's major religions but appears instead to be profane in origin.

God Friended Me works out these ethical dilemmas by something we can call network TV moral theory: In each episode, a character faces a common, difficult decision—how to heal broken trust in a family, how to recover from serious material loss—in circumstances written to make those decisions much easier than in the real world. This worldview makes our moral choices much simpler than they ever are; it also fixates on individuals. The account is run by an entity with vastly more information and power than any of the characters on the show, which the entity uses not for mankind's salvation or cosmic justice but to improve the lives of a handful of people without making drastic changes to the structures that caused them strife in the first place. Miles and his friends search high and low for the entity behind the God account, but they'll never find it, because the God of *God Friended Me* is the CBS Entertainment Group and the network comedy-drama format in general.

God *Friended Me* is executive produced by Greg Berlanti, a prolific television producer who recently signed a \$300 million deal with Warner Bros. Television Group, a division of WarnerMedia. He currently holds the record for producing the most live-action scripted TV shows airing in the same year: 18, including the CW series *Riverdale*, *Supergirl*, and *Arrow*. The show's other executive producers include cocreators Bryan Wynbrandt and Steven Lilien, longtime friends who frequently debate religious questions. (Both were raised in Jewish households. Lilien is still religious, and Wynbrandt is agnostic.) The idea for the show sprang fully formed from Wynbrandt's mind in 2011, when he saw a Facebook notification on his phone while driving to meet Lilien. "I just thought to myself, 'What if God or something calling themselves God started sending you friend suggestions?'" he recalled in an interview with Religion News Service.

As the idea developed, Lilien and Wynbrandt began to see social media and religion as analogues. Wynbrandt said they were

fascinated by "the idea that, like religion... [social media] is supposed to be a positive [place]. It's something hopeful, something that's supposed to bring people together, but it's perverted by humanity in a lot of ways. You see it being used to divide us."

Are the problems with social media similar to the problems with religion, as Wynbrandt suggests? Depending on your beliefs, religion was created either by a higher power or by generations of people searching for answers to existential questions. Social media was invented in the last three decades to turn a profit from a to-be-determined revenue source that turned out to be surveilling users and selling their data. *God Friended Me* positions itself as a show about how we live now, but it is more accurately a show about how Berlanti, Lilien, and Wynbrandt apparently believe viewers think about how they live now. A feel-good comedy-drama in which the weekly literal deus ex machina is God's Facebook account speaks to viewers by allaying cultural anxieties about negativity on the Internet, the secularization of contemporary life, and whether the use of our data by large tech companies will prove harmful or benevolent.

God Friended Me's responses to these anxieties are optimistic and simple: God has a plan; others will use the exposure of our personal lives on social media to help us; and anger, unhappiness, and loss are often caused by miscommunication. In one episode, Miles's friend suggestion is a young father named Russell who fails to show up in court after being charged with stealing a car. When the crew finds him, he explains that he is running because he does not want his infant daughter to go into foster care, an inevitable result if he goes to prison. This is a brutal, common occurrence in the American criminal justice system, one without easy resolution and impossible to truly solve without structural change. But the show provides a quick fix nevertheless: Russell did not steal the car; he was hired to move it by an acquaintance named Emmett, who is already in jail on unrelated charges. Miles persuades Emmett to admit to the crime, Russell is acquitted, and the show neatly sidesteps the question of whether people who steal cars deserve God's personal help.

Although Facebook has made no official statement about it, *God Friended Me* could not have been made without the tech company's permission to use its name and interface. This makes *God Friended Me* feel like a dialogue between a technology corporation and a media con-

glomerate; the holy text produced a dipartite God perversely fixated on telling feel-good stories and questioning the need for data privacy. As a network comedy-drama, it uses common traumas as setups for the catharsis of an improbable solution. As a show about technology, those solutions often involve accessing sensitive personal information online without permission.

In one episode, Miles's Facebook friend suggestion from God is Julia, the daughter of the woman his father is about to marry. Miles discovers that Julia and her husband, Sam, are getting a divorce, and when Miles presses her, she tells him that the divorce is largely due to the couple's inability to conceive. We cut to the following day in Rakesh's office at a tech startup, where Miles, Rakesh, and Cara are brainstorming a solution to save the marriage, which they believe is the God account's agenda. Rakesh has hacked into Julia's insurance account and sees an unusual claim: an ob-gyn visit that included an ultrasound. Miles remembers that Julia avoided drinking champagne the night before, and when he and Cara confront her—"We didn't mean to pry, really," Cara says, erroneously, "but we know what you're keeping from [Sam]"—Julia reluctantly confirms that they're right, she is pregnant, but she doesn't want her husband to know.

The episode's plot becomes only more convoluted after that. The leap from the desire to help another person to accessing her medical records and then confronting her about a decision not to share reproductive information with a soon-to-be-ex-husband would be alarming in real life but is entirely normal in the universe of *God Friended Me*, in which invasions of privacy undertaken with good intentions are not only blameless but also charming and heartwarming.

In an interview with Wynbrandt and Lilien, journalist and religious blogger Kate O'Hare pondered the different implications if the God account's origin was divine or human. (On the show, Miles tracks down a lead that the account is an algorithm stolen from DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, though that appears to be a red herring; the series finale heavily implies that the account is run by God.) "If the God account does not have a supernatural or alien origin, that means there's someone on Earth who has the capability of doing what the God account does," O'Hare said. "And while that's cool, it's also a little scary." "Well, I mean, scary, yes, but they are [doing] very good things," Wynbrandt replied. "So, the means to the end, I think, is justified." ■

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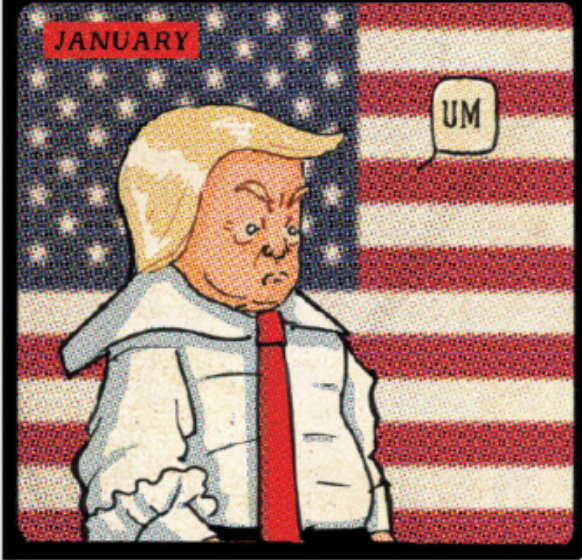
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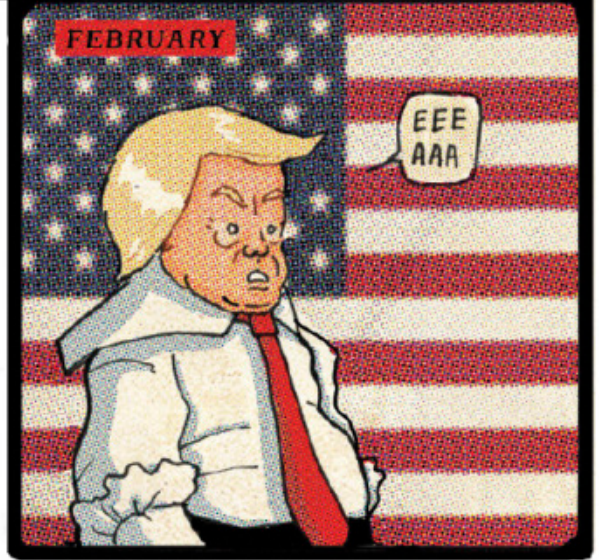
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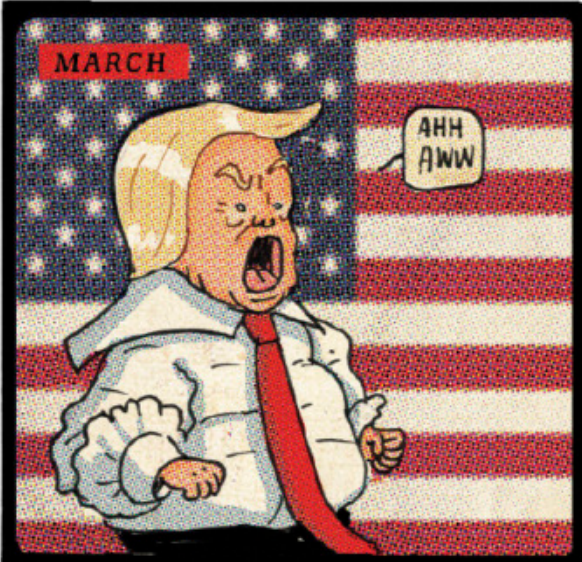
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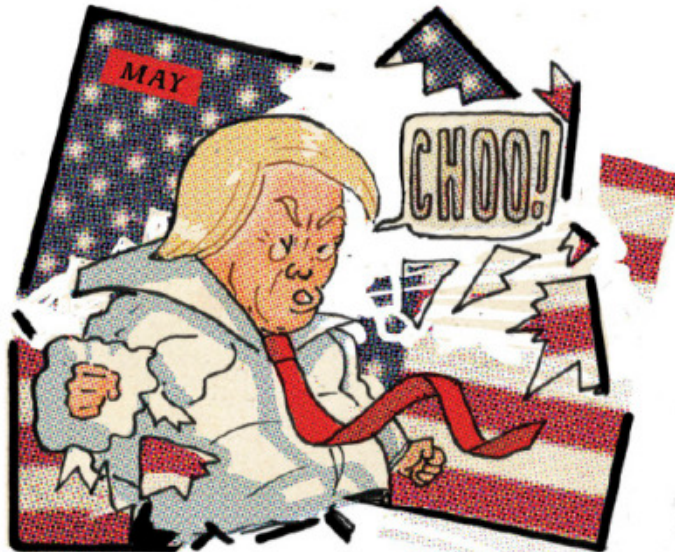
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